

Till Death Us Do Part

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Prolog

Pa was sore as hell at him, and he didn't know what he could do about it. He huddled in a corner of his room, not liking the smell one bit, but knowing that the stench would soon clear out, and that life inside the old farmhouse would, eventually, come back to normal within a few days. Until then, he didn't know how long it was until he was going to be able to sit down again.

It was beyond his ability to act any differently; hell, he had loved that little dog with all his heart and soul, and he couldn't bear the thought of being parted from it. So he had done the only logical thing he could see to do, under the circumstances. Why didn't any of them understand?

It had all started when he was walking Scoot in an old field by the road. On these expeditions, with an old cord tied around his dog's neck, he would follow wherever Scoot's nose led them. Often, it was burrowing through the dips and rises in the fields, looking for field mice, and the occasional rabbit. Then, when boy and dog were exhausted by play, they could both sit under a tree and watch the sun dip behind the clouds, until Ma stood on the porch calling them in for dinner.

On the particular tragic day that stood out so terribly in his memory, he had not had the dog leashed, and instead was playing a game of fetch with a little rubber ball he had picked up somewhere; he would walk along, throw the ball out, and let the dog go hunt around in the tall grasses for it while he ambled along behind.

It had been several moments later that he saw the dog poised, as if to strike, and heard her growling menacingly. He ran forward, immediately, and when he got up to where his dog was crouched, growling, suddenly he heard her yelp in pain, and was just quick enough to see a snake disappear behind a fallen log. He looked down at his feet, and the dog lay dead.

He had walked home in a daze, the tears not falling until he reached the safety of home and the arms of his mother. His father, a stern old farmer who entertained no nonsense, was even a little taken aback, and it was not long before he had tromped out the door and across the fields to go claim the carcass of the animal. He had scratched his head, asking himself, "Wonder what on earth kind of serpent it was?"

He brought the carcass back, slung over his shoulder, and laid it in the barn. Then he went to fetch his shovel, and walked back into the old house, saying, "We'll bury it in the backyard, boy. Come with me."

Still sobbing, he had climbed down from his mother's knees, and

followed his father back out of the house and across the yard, as their shadows stretched across the ground in the slow sunset. He felt cold all over, and his chest ached with the fury of his grief.

He followed his father inside, and there resting atop a haystack was the fly-blown body of his beloved puppy, its tongue lolling out and its eyes rolled up to whites in its head. He let out a great sob at the sight, and suddenly felt the cold, tough slap of his father's hand come down like a great gavel on the cheek of his face.

"Quit being a baby, Carl! You have to get use to such sights if you're ever to be any help around here at all. This here is what death looks like, and don't you ever forget it. Here, take a good look--"

And his father grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and thrust him forward, inches away from the dead dog's snout. He could smell a faint whiff of the dog's odor as he sobbed there, silently now, tears still streaming down his face.

Buh-bye, Scoot, he thought dismally. Inside, he felt as if all the life in his soul had suddenly been crushed from him. His father, suddenly pleased that he had quieted down, patted his head, saying, "Good. Now, quit crying, there's a good boy. It ain't so bad now, is it? Death is just something you have to get used to. Everything dies, Carl. Everything. One of these days your mother will lie, just as dead as that dog there, and I and your sister and all our kinfolk and friends, and one day even you will die, Carl. It does no good to worry about the dead: it's the living that require the care and concern. Now, c'mon."

And with that, his father grabbed his shovel and walked out of the barn. He went to a little corner of the backyard next to the garden, under an overarching tree, and began to solemnly shovel a little earth until he had a small hole dug that he adjudged sufficient. He then turned to his son, who had grown stoic and cold in these last few minutes, and said, "Now, go get the animal, and bring him out here."

He looked up at his father in a perplexing mixture of fear, hatred, and disgust, but knew that protesting would do no good. On legs that felt rubber and nearly refused to move, he trudged back to the barn, and slipped into the dark crack of the doorway.

He squinted in the gloom until he found the haystack, and in his mind flashed all the good times he had had playing with his dog, holding his dog, and loving the animal with the fierce love of a small boy. He did what he could to stuff the great wail of pain that was threatening to burst out from his chest again, and instead adopted a new, curious fascination for the little

husk of flesh that now lay before him. It seemed both curious and frightening at the same time, that bizarre suspension of movement that rendered what had, previously, been his living pet into little more than a stiff mockery that simply bore the physical form. Where did the movement go, the breath? Why were the eyes so dull and white?

He shuddered, feeling a wave of nausea grip him as he stared at the dead little thing, and then he heard his father call from the yard, “Boy! Boy, hurry it up in there, dinner’s getting cold!”

He swallowed hard, put his hands on the cold fur, and picked up the dog, surprised at how heavy the dead weight felt in his arms. He carried it in both arms before him, not liking the smell, the feel of the thing, nor the buzzing flies that seemed to dot to and fro over the surface. He walked slowly with it held out before him, to where his father was standing, leaning on his shovel with a hand-rolled cigarette perched between his lips.

He laid his burden on the ground next to the hole, and his father paused for a moment, heaved a sigh, and scooped the dead dog up in his shovel, depositing her in the hole rather unceremoniously, and with the same heavy, plodding surety with which he performed all of his other considerable tasks and chores. He then patted down the dirt, and Carl’s mother came out of the porch for a moment, folded her arms, and then walked over to the burial place in the yard.

She looked down at her son, and said, “Ain’t there something you’re forgetting about, son?”

He looked up at her through eyes that were red and puffy. She seemed every bit as large and foreboding as his father in the gathering gloom of twilight.

“You should say a prayer, Carl. You should say a prayer for your dog...”

“Elizabeth, don’t encourage him.”

“No, I think that he should.”

“But,” he said, his voice quavering a little, “We learned in Sunday School that animals don’t have souls.”

“Oh, that’s not a proven fact I think. Carl. Anyway, a person should pray at a time like this, and don’t you think we could all use a good prayer right about now?”

So his father removed his cap, and his mother bowed her head, as he began to fumblingly offer a few words for his dead dog.

“Our heavenly father, please makes sure that Scoot is okay there in heaven, and take real good care of her, and forgive her if she ever done wrong by anyone while she was alive. Amen.”

“Amen,” intoned his mother, and his father followed suit.

Inside his heart though, he hadn’t really prayed to God at all. He had cursed God for using a filthy old snake to take his beloved pet away from him. And, as his mother had bade him go and wash up, he began to devise a fantastical plan to bring Scoot back, and make things normal again.

He ate little that evening, and after his chores were done, asked permission to go upstairs, complaining that he didn’t feel well enough to sit through the family Bible devotions. His mother, understanding of the way he felt, relented, but he could see that it pleased his father not a bit.

“Are you sure, Carl? A fellow that feels as sorrowful as you might do well to hear a little from the Bible. Might make you feel a darn sight better, might it not?”

He said nothing, but his mother turned and whispered something to his father, and they exchanged a look, and so his father turned to him, waved his hand, and said, “Go on, boy. Tonight, you can go to sleep early.”

He climbed the creaking stairway to his bedroom, suddenly liking the darkness and the coolness of the air upstairs. Below, he could hear his mother reading to his brother and sister and father from the Bible, from God’s Holy Word. He felt a tremor of resentment as he heard the words ring upward, and he climbed into bed feeling the darkness penetrate in around him. He lay there for what seemed like an eternity, staring out at the lonely moon and feeling like the unluckiest little boy in the entire world. There was no chance of sleep for him that night.

He did doze, though, and when his brother finally came upstairs to bed, he popped his eyes open for a bleary second, wasn’t sure if he was dreaming, and then rolled over to face the wall. Byron took his clothes off in the darkness, not bothering to say a word, and climbed beneath the cool comforter and went to his own dreams.

Carl awoke in the dead of night, and the moon was as full and as bright as he had ever seen it. He lay there for a moment, the sadness of sleeping without his dog still clutching at his belly, and more poignant memories poking at him. But, also, he felt, distinctly, a little ill at ease.

He supposed it must have been a trick of his mind upon awakening, but he was nearly certain that he saw Scoot sitting on the floor in the moonlight, her head resting on her paws. He had actually gotten up, and found that this had been simply a hallucination, a trick of his half-asleep brain, but it had unsettled him, and he had the creeping sense that somehow, he and his brother weren’t alone in the room.

It was a feeling he couldn’t quite put his finger on, but the longer he lay

there, the more conscious he became of the feeling of being watched, of the feeling of being touched by invisible fingers. He thought maybe he was going plum crazy.

Just then, he could feel a new power seep into his bones, as he thought of the cold, calculating way he had managed to stare down death, and stifle his tears and childhood fears under a cloak of cold guile. True, his father had been responsible for that, but Carl secretly wondered if his father was not a little surprised at just how well and ‘manly’ he had managed to behave during the short ordeal. He had stared death in the face, had felt its icy terror grip him momentarily, and was all the stronger for it. Now, he felt a little like he could be one with death, that he could befriend it. And it gave him an important idea.

As he lay in bed that night, and into the wee hours of the morning, his mind began to formulate the plan of what he was going to do. Not tonight, and perhaps not tomorrow night, but soon.

The next few days were like a strange dream to the boy: he did his chores mechanically and efficiently, ate his meals quietly, spoke little, went to school and studied his lessons just as he always had, but even his father knew that something was different about him, and at times seemed to be fighting some sort of inner battle with himself about what to do or say about it. His mother grew increasingly worried, and his siblings simply ignored him. He spent much of his free time simply wandering in the fields, feeling his hideous new strength deep down in his bones, and listening to the silent voice on the wind.

It was late one night when he woke from troubled dreams, rolled over, and again saw the fat, full moon shining in his window upon him, as if it were a giant beacon calling him forth while the rest of his family slept. He got out of bed, hugging himself in the chill, and listened, for a moment, for the loud, sawing snore of his father in the room across the hall.

He got up, tip-toeing as quietly as he could, and went to the door, looking out in the darkness. His eyes were rapidly adjusting to the dark, and he stepped out cautiously, his heart hammering in his chest, and began to feel his way, his outstretched arm trailing one side of the wall, to the staircase.

He made it to the top of the stairs, looking down into what seemed, suddenly, like fathomless darkness. He knew that the stairs creaked quite a bit, and he sincerely hoped he could make it down, slowly, without a loud creak waking up his folks. He knew that the first step was decisive, and felt

his foot slowly trailing across the carpeted floor until it fell into place along the first step.

One, two , three...

How many damn steps were there? It seemed like he had been walking down them for an eternity. Suddenly, his foot must have hit a bad spot, because a loud, grinding creak erupted and pierced the darkness like a banshee cry. He felt his heart began to race as he stood, perfectly still, not even daring to breathe, his blood pressure pulsing in his ears.

He listened for a moment, sure that, any second, his father would appear as a hulking black shadow in the moonlight. His heart thumped madly in his ears, so loud he was certain that it could be heard outside and down the road. He felt his blood pump like ice water through his veins. Time seemed to have ground to a halt.

With hammering nerves, he continued walking down the stairs, trying desperately to control his breathing and suddenly realizing that he had to pee. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness now, and he could make his way more easily. He crossed the living room in swift and silent steps.

He went into the darkened kitchen, and out the back. The coolness of the doorknob felt good in his throbbing palm, and he twisted it slowly, not liking the little rattle of the brass as the door slowly swung inward. Outside, the milk white light of the early morning stood revealed to him in occult wonder.

He stepped out onto the back porch in his stocking feet, mindful that a tiny misstep could bring a painful splinter, and slowly made his way down the flagstone pathway and across the yard, bedazzled for a moment, as he looked into the shifting clouds and silvery beams of bright moonlight dancing in the country sky. He stopped for a moment, letting the cool breeze and the deep, rustling purr of night magic play into his soul. He then went, slowly, as if in a gradually increasing trance, toward the overarching branches of the old tree.

He knelt at the little mound of earth, beneath which the body of his doggie lie moldering amid worms and bugs. He felt the sadness nearly well up again, but he also felt something entirely unlike himself, as well. It was a feeling that he had never experienced before, a kind of power that the shifting beams of moonlight imbued his soul with in these distant hours before sunrise. He could hear the chirp of cicadas, and the gentle blowing of leaves and tall growing things, and he knew, for a moment, that he was a part of it all; that he had, somehow, broken through an invisible barrier this night. Getting out of bed and actually coming out here by himself had been

the decisive act, but now it was as if he had crossed, for the first time in his life, a point of no return. He felt something stir inside, something alive and moving and cold and wicked and powerful all at the same time.

It was love...

Love, and death, together; as one inside himself. He was, for a moment, in communion with the vast secret of all living and dying things, and he was as close to the beetling bugs and the burrowing worms of the earth, as he was with the ghostly shafts of moonlight, the faerie clouds and crooked branches and rustling leaves. It was all of him; he was infinite, and contained multitudes.

He knelt, digging trembling fingers into the earth. He fancied, below him, he could hear the mumbling vibrations of his dog, feel the pulse of something giving birth in a cocoon of earth and rot. His fingers ate up the clumps of dirt, until, at long last, they touched the rough, matted fur of what had been, a few days earlier, deliberately buried.

It had been a long, strange night of dreams which had followed, but as he lay that morning, shivering in bed, throwing off the dust of last night's dreaming from his brain, he remembered, suddenly, his strange escapade outside under the moon, and he sat bolt upright. Had he really done it, or had he just imagined so? He wasn't, at this moment, entirely sure; it felt as if he had only been a passive observer last night, and not really in control whatsoever.

He had gotten out of bed then, fell to his knees (as if to say his prayers) , and then had spied the white bundle pushed far back against the wall. Suddenly, a bolt of sheer terror seemed to stab his heart , and he stood, breathing in and out heavily.

This was followed, in a moment, amazingly, with a queer thrill of satisfaction. He had done it; whatever force was with him, had taken him over, had given him the strength to carry out what he knew had to be done. He could feel a new sense of power, a terrible, cold sense of strength and control, begin to submerge his mind like a second skin.

That night, he lay in bed and could feel the pulsing vibration of spirit beneath him. He felt the bed begin to shake, vibrate really, and then felt his head swim as if he was standing on board a ship at sea, being rocked back and forth in the maelstrom. He closed his eyes. He communed. No one, not his siblings or his parents, had suspected a thing, and he made himself a firm promise before dropping off into a troubled sleep that, from this point forward, nothing and no one in life would ever deny him what he wanted.

He would claim love, however he could, and once it was his, he would never let it slip through his fingers again.

The coming days were unseasonably warm.

It was not long before his father, when putting on his boots one morning, first noticed a uniquely unpleasant stench that seemed to be wafting through the still air of the house, and turning to his wife, he said, "I bet a possum has crawled underneath the house and died. I need to get under there today and have myself a look."

His mother, who was combing her hair, looked over at him and said, "I smell it too...noticed it last night for the first time. Might be the gutters, too. Seems particularly bad up here. Of course, we ain't had any rain in awhile, either."

"Must be something has died in here. Well, I'll root it out, whatever it is."

With that he slipped on his boots, went down to the kitchen to brew some coffee, and then set about the morning work. The children were roused from bed, and all tottered downstairs to get some breakfast before it was time to do the chores. All except little Carl, who complained that he was feeling poor. His mother came in, took a look at him, decided he did seem a bit peaked, and let him stay in bed, telling him she would explain to his father. She then told him she would bring up a cup of broth later and walked quietly out the room, closing the door behind her, and throwing the room back into the black pitch right before sunup.

Secretly, he was delighted. His father and brothers would be out in the fields today, and his mother would be busy cleaning and fetching supper. Overall, he could rely on long stretches of being alone today, and the prospect excited him.

He would have to be sure, of course: to listen hard for footsteps coming up the stairs. But he had ears as keen as anyone.

For that whole first day, whenever he could, he would jump out of bed, peek underneath it, and extract the white bundle that held his morbid prize. He would carefully unwrap it, leave it lay before him on the floor of the bedroom, and stare at it, willing it back to life, half scared and half fascinated by the strange stiffness, the bizarre, unpleasant smell, the staring, lifeless eyes...It was as if, in the new state, his dog had not really ceased to be, but (at least in the fervent chambers of his own brain), had become something new entirely, something fresh to consider. A new type of writhing, stinking thing that was born of pain, and suffering, and of his own fear. After a few moments, he was no longer afraid, simply puzzled and

intrigued. A few noises from downstairs, however, brought him back to his senses, and he quickly wrapped the carcass back up, and thrust it back under his bed, against the wall. He then dove under the covers, and turned to face the cracked plaster.

That time, it was his mother, bringing him his cup of chicken broth, and feeling the fevered heat of his forehead with her large, cool hand. Indeed, he was feverish, and pretending to be ill was not difficult. Perhaps the night wind had really touched him more than he at first reckoned. Most probably it was the simple surge of thrilling excitement his act had produced in his mind and soul.

“Now, you just lie here and be very still, Carl, and I will be up in a little while to see how you’re feeling. Alright?”

“Alright, Mama”, he said. “Say, Pa isn’t sore at me, is he? I sure do feel awful about not getting to my chores today.”

His mother looked at him kindly; at any other time, he would have felt terrible for deceiving her. Not now, though; now, he was as reborn to a new understanding of himself, and his power, as he was ever likely to be. As he lay in bed, his mother’s cool hand caressing his forehead, he saw a vision of himself a hundred feet tall, impervious, a master of life and death, and a giant in a world of folks whose brains hadn’t been touched the way his had, just last night. He felt cold and excited, and strong and determined as an ox.

“Carl, your father works very hard. He gets upset sometimes, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t love you, or doesn’t understand when you are feeling poorly. Now,” she leaned over and kissed his forehead, “I want you to try and rest.” She suddenly straightened herself, and said, curiously, “Carl? Do you smell that, Carl?”

She breathed in a draught of air, and looked a little repulsed, “Oh, oh I do hope he finds whatever it is that is making that awful smell. It’s particularly strong right now.”

And with that, she turned, her heavy matronly dress swishing against the wooden boards, and walked out, closing the door firmly behind her. Carl didn’t notice the smell anymore.

Meanwhile, his father had spent several hours poking around beneath the porch, and then in the basement, and had not found anything with which to explain the foul odor that was becoming more apparent. He then decided to have a look in the rain gutters, to see, perhaps, if a squirrel had perhaps died in them among some moldering leaves, but, after some exhausting inspection atop a rickety old ladder, he satisfactorily convinced himself that he had a real mystery on his hands.

Since the house had no indoor plumbing, it was impossible for it to have been a sewage line. At any rate, whatever it was, he reckoned it might be nice and leave them alone after awhile, and he went in, slightly chagrined that night, to supper. However, as the days turned into a week, the smell became worse; overpoweringly nauseating, really. The family began to live with the windows opened around the clock, and Carl's mother even attempted to burn a special herbal mixture she purchased from the local druggist, reputed to help with foul odors. Nothing worked however, and by Saturday the entire family began to find the situation intolerable.

Except for little Carl. The smell didn't trouble him in the least.

He had spent the last several days lying in bed, his feverish mind and body wracked by pleasure at his deception, and the pulse inside his head growing louder. He could feel the vibrations of the bed beneath him as he lay at night, blocking out the nasal drones of his brother's snores, and suddenly he had discovered that, in a strange way, life would never again be the same for him.

He played the sick game as long as he could, and in truth, he really felt as weak and drained as what he looked. One day his brother came in to change his clothes and shot him a look as if to say, "Are you still here faking, you little snot?", but he said nothing, and quickly departed to hustle down the stairs and do Carl's share of the chores as well as his own. Carl smiled to himself to think of it.

One day, as his father was rummaging around upstairs, and lamenting his inability to discover the source of the smell, he heard, just below the sonorous sound of his sick son's snoring, a troubling buzzing that he took to be the buzzing of flies. Curious that there should be flies in his house at all, he stepped from his own bedroom into the hall, and followed his sensitive ears to the door of his boys' room. He slowly opened the door, walked softly inside, and noticed not one, but several flies darting to and fro around Carl Junior's bed. A few had alighted on the window overlooking the back yard.

He walked slowly toward the bed, looking down at the sleeping form of the young boy, aching, for a moment, with a terrible fierce love that he knew, deep inside, he was powerless to ever adequately convey. But, beyond that, there was something troubling here. He stooped down, went to his hands and knees and looked underneath the bed, finding that which he already knew must be hidden in the dusty gloom.

"Carl! Carl Junior! Come down here this instant, young man."

Carl felt himself roused from another in a long series of very strange

dreams, and looking outside to orient himself, he realized that he had slept pretty much the entire day away. The sun was dipping below the trees, and the world outside had shuddered down to twilight. His head still swimming, he realized, with a sinking feeling, that he had just been summoned below. Also, it was the voice of his mother.

“Carl! Come down here this instant. Your father needs to have a word with you.”

With a trembling heart, young Carl climbed slowly from bed, answering, in a quavering voice, “Just a minute, Ma! I need to put my clothes on.” He stumbled out of bed, and stood shaking for a moment, his heart pitter-pattering in his chest. His legs felt frozen beneath him, but he forced himself down onto his trembling knees and peered beneath the darkness of his bed.

His heart sank to his stomach, and a flock of butterflies erupted in his bowels. He suddenly had to pee very badly, but knew there was no avoiding what came next. With legs that felt like blocks of wood, he calmly and slowly began to walk down the stairs and into the kitchen, where his family was gathered around the table. His father sat, sternly upright in his chair, his hand grasping his knee, his arm crooked in consternation as he eyed his little son with pupils of fire.

His mother was sitting on the other side of the round table, his little sister at her knees, her face a mask of sadness and disappointment. Over near the back door, his older brother stood at the screen door, leaning against the jamb with his arms crossed and a sardonic sneering smile upon his lips. Little Carl stopped in front of the white bundle on the floor. His father bent over, pulled back the flap of the bundle, and said, “I guess we found what was stinking so.”

Below him, the rotted carcass was writhing with fat maggots.

His mother turned her head, put her hand over her mouth, and half-standing shooed his little sister out of the kitchen, telling her to run out back and play. His father continued to consider him with that cold, steely, steady gaze.

Softly, not unkindly, but as if he was genuinely puzzled, he said, “Why, boy? What got into your head? Can you tell me that? Have you plum lost your mind?”

But of course, even as Carl tried to make his lips and throat work, and barely managed to squeeze out a single syllable, he realized that nothing he said would make any difference at all. In truth, he had no answer, no excuse or explanation for his weird actions, and in a panic, he simply turned, ran up stairs, and shut the door behind him, burying his face in his pillow. In a few

minutes he heard the heavy tread of his father on the stairs below.

Later, in the woodshed, he was bent across his father's knees, his drawers down around his ankles. He had had to cut his own switch, and his father had gone with him to select a good stout specimen. The thrashing was the worst he could ever remember having, but he didn't cry or protest, and each lash drove deeper and deeper into him that one conviction that, forever after, he was as different from the ordinary mass of men as it was possible to be. He felt each stroke of the lash, after that, deep inside his soul. But, as far as his body was concerned, he felt it not at all.

Part 1

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me. --Edgar Allen Poe

He was traveling in sickness: there was seemingly no way to end the suffering that was roiling around in his stomach, and threatening to bring up the hearty lunch he had eaten at the train station just several hours ago. He rolled over on his bunk, listening to the clack-clack sound of the train wheels chomp up the rusted track beneath her.

Above him, the darkness of the compartment swirled in little, shaking eddies of night, as, intermittently, a silver sliver of moonlight broke it. Such an odd thing for a night as seemingly cloud bestrewn as this one.

He reached down and held his stomach in one cursed grip. *All right*, he thought to himself sourly, *I am going to die here on a train bound for St. Louis. Well, those are the breaks, kid.*

Clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack--whoosh!

The sounds reverberated through his aching mind; alright, he thought, it was music to send someone straight to Hell with; it was the infernal, industrialized racket of a somber, goddamned age that refused to be lovely, to be loved.

That sound had the iron-shod boots of doughboys bound up into it. His stomach sent another knife into his nervous system, and he moaned again.

He was damned if he knew what was wrong with him, save for maybe indigestion or ulcers. But, damned if it didn't feel like his kidneys had exploded. Maybe he had appendicitis or some damn thing. He really should know, he thought sourly. He was, after all, supposed to be a doctor.

At least he wasn't bound to suffer any fools on this trip; had his own compartment, to suffer all by himself in. Well, if it was serious, he hoped he might eventually black out from the pain, and just die in peace. It wasn't death that troubled him.

Not a bit.

He hopped down from his bunk and walked to the compartment door, hitching it open with one quivering hand, and peeping his head out.

"Porter!"

No answer.

"Goddamn it, boy! Get your backside out here! I'm dying, already!"

A very groggy, weary-looking young man in a rumpled uniform suddenly appeared from the doorway at the end of the passenger car. He rubbed his eyes blearily, reminded himself of whom he was dealing with, and said, "Seems to be the trouble, Sir?"

The old man looked at him as if he might spit in indignation, and said,

"Trouble? What seems to be the trouble? Are you kidding me, sonny? I'll tell you what the trouble is: I got a goddamned cancer growing up inside me, that's what!"

The boy looked carefully, skeptically ignorant.

"Cancer? Are you sure it's as bad as all that? Maybe you just drank too much, or something. Coulda been?"

The old man looked like he was on the verge of pissing his nightgown in wrathful indignation. He spat, "You insolent little cur, why don't you unplug those great big phony ears for a minute and listen to what I have to say?"

"I'm listening."

"No you're not. You say you are, because it's your job, and you don't want to risk it. You hooligans are all alike: nothing upstairs but broads and blackjack. No skills but chugging cheap rum and goldbricking your way through a double shift. And here I am, a poor old man dying on a southbound train at eleven thirty-five on a Monday evening, and no one to offer aid nor comfort except some pissant punk in a cheap red suit and a marching band hat. Oh, saints preserve us if this is the best that Uncle Sam can turn out in a time of crisis. We'll all be speaking German next year."

The young man didn't know whether or not laughter was acceptable in such a situation, but he did it anyway, looked away a little shamefacedly,

and crossing his arms in front of himself. He said, “Well, okay, you say you have a cancer inside of you. Now, I think what you probably have is a touch of gastritis, but seeing as how I’ve never been to medical school, I’m afraid my diagnosis is liable to be unreliable. Say, you want some pain pills, huh?”

“I want some morphine, goddam it, and I’d be willing to pay a pretty penny for it, too.”

He whistled through his teeth, said, “Sorry, sir, can’t help you there. But I can give you some, uh, special pills we keep in cases where passengers get agitated. You know, a couple Mickey Finns and I think you’ll forget all about your pain, your cancer, this conversation, and everything else for a blissful seven hours or so. Hold on just a minute.”

And the young man disappeared down the hall, popping through the door and unlocking a storage compartment to his left. He reached in, pulled out a brown glass bottle, shook out some knockout drops, and came back, saying, “Here you go, Mr. Tanzler. Just swallow these beauties, and I swear, you’ll be off to sleepy-bye land in no time.”

Tanzler suddenly looked a little less vicious, a little more appreciative, and, through the paper whiteness of his chalky features, the ghost of a smile crept. He stammered for a moment, said, “Well, thank you...I hope you realize, when I tell you I’m in pain, I really am in serious pain. Serious, serious pain.”

The porter smiled.

“Oh I never for a moment doubted it, Sir. Now, good night, and if you need anything else, don’t hesitate.”

“Yes. Thank you. Right.”

And he closed the thin compartment door, and was happy again to be alone in the darkness.

He swallowed the pills dry, and crawled back onto the top bunk, although he could have just as easily used the bottom one. The old train creaked and clattered and rocked as the darkened landscape blew by the little cube of window in the wall.

Fundamentally, he was never really sure that what he suffered with was nothing more than psychosomatic ills. He knew, quite likely, that there was no cancer, really. Or, at least, he consciously knew it. His subconscious knew other, darker realities that swam forward from the pit of his being to poke and plunder him at every opportunity.

He had often envisioned the great, black, malignant growth as it clustered and spread itself in his body. It looked to him like a vicious squid that fed, slowly, off of his moist entrails bit by bit, piece by piece, assuring

an eventual agonizing death. But he had never been diagnosed, of course.

He could feel the heavy intoxication of the drug as it began to take hold. He closed his eyes, suddenly, feeling his head swim out into the darkness, hearing the metallic rustle and clang and grind of the train now as a gentle, industrial lullaby. Psychological or not, his pain was becoming manageable. He began to drift.

As he lay upon his back, sweating the last of his feverish dreams into the hustling monotony of the train clatter, his dreaming mind swept before him in a vista of strange, half-realized visions.

It was the sort of garbled, half-prescient outpourings from the depths of his unconscious mind that he was accustomed to at such times as these, periods when his nervous constitution got the better of him. He lay back, half-asleep, and let the kaleidoscope of shifting pictures carry him further along the night shores of his half-slumbering brain.

There he was as a small boy, pining over the loss of his beloved dog. There again, tossing stones into the old creek by his house, letting the day slip by him in a somber reverie that others often told him he was too young to feel. But he had always been a strange child; bookish and quiet, haunted only by the deep, still rustling of the old woods behind his family house.

His father Karl had been a big, iron-hard German immigrant with no sense of humor or imagination, and as soon as he could, he managed to get away from home, with its endless petty demands on his heart and soul. It was a drifter's life for awhile, and then a hustler's. He had worked in carnival mitt camps, washed dishes in sleazy hotels, moved through the world of vice and ended up in the world of genteel Midwestern society. He had been a Doctor for awhile. Before Rose, and love, had brought his life to ruin.

The house was a large, roomy, sometimes drafty Victorian settled at the end of a long dirt drive, and it was as comfortable to Tanzler as it could possibly be. Inside, in a set of ground-floor rooms he had converted especially for the purpose, he maintained office hours and saw patients. It was only a short time before he had established a bustling business.

It was on a pale September day, when the weather was first beginning to unleash that steadily dampening, cooling wind that heralded the coming of snow and icy gloom, that he peeked into the waiting area to ascertain what

was up next for him that afternoon.

His secretary, a large, middling intelligent woman named Mrs. Cove, flipped through the appointment book, and turned, saying, “Steinmetz. You have an half an hour. I suggest you relax, Doctor. You’re looking a little peaked.”

“I’ll be the judge of when I need to relax, Mrs. Cove,” but in truth, he thought, that was probably exactly what was called for at the present time. He turned, hustled out of the waiting room, went to his study, cocked back in a chair, and rubbed his eyes. He just as quickly got up, went to the heavy cabinet beside the fireplace, took out an unmarked bottle, and shook a couple of white pills into the palm of his hand. He quickly went to the kitchen, retrieved a bottle of milk from the fridge, and quickly downed his favorite medicine. He then went back to his study and fell into a heap into his leather chair.

He had spent the morning looking in ears and up noses and down throats, and he was damn tired of it. But, he reflected, it was how he managed to live so good, when so many others were going without under the present economical straits.

He picked up the newspaper, looked at the front page, saw a picture of President Hoover, and put the paper back down in disgust. He closed his eyes for a moment, and relaxed, letting the world flow out from the prism of his mind, and taking instead a cursory glance at some swimming mental images that were buried just beneath the mask of his waking dream.

It was a serene garden, lighted by the fuzzy glow of a sun peeping behind clouds, and he was now a far more charming, altogether more handsome- looking version of himself, sitting on a stone bench and picking flowers. From somewhere he could hear the wonderful chirping of a few small birds among the yawning branches of the darkening leaves. Their color had already started to crisp to red shot through with patches of yellow and brown.

Much as always, he was damnably alone.

He was holding a rose.

Rose.

Rose.

Why did the name have such a special significance for him? Always had. He had always, really, loved that name.

In his native German, it was spelled exactly the same, except the plural was *rosen*. He had never learned much German, always found it too brute a tongue to adopt, and, furthermore, it reminded him of his father, and there

was a character he would be keen to forget for the rest of his natural life. More flowers, more images swept past his preening inner eye. He had a mind that drank up beauty, for he knew he himself would never be beautiful. It drank up ugliness too, and sometimes thought of it as beauty.

Therein, he sometimes surmised, lied the crux of his fatal flaw, his unwillingness to make his life a meditation on strictly the most edifying, uplifting, and wholesome examples of human behavior. But, damn it all, he was alone, and an idle, lonely man is as surely a pawn of perverse imaginings as any man constantly in the whirlwind of wife and children.

Now, the beautiful garden had been transformed into a wooden gazebo, surrounded by spectacular, charming flowers, and he nearly fancied he could hear the strains of a string quartet deliver the blissful somnambulist strains of sunset melody. He lazed back, with his arms cocked on the bench shoulder-length, and looked out as the setting sun painted sparkling diamonds on the surface of the lake. He was in the park.

Alone, for all he could surmise.

Maybe a laughing child whispering in the wind, or perhaps a ghost, for he did fancy he heard a faint chuckle erupt somewhere in the rushing breeze.

The clouds drifted by as shadows lengthened across the tall grass. He began to doze, leaning his head quite far back, dreaming a dream within a dream. Suddenly, he tilted his head forward a bit, to escape a particularly harassing beam of slumbering sunlight, when his eyes caught the form of what, at the very first, he took to be a twilight ghost, lifted up from the netherworld of wandering spirits to retrace the strange little footsteps she had walked in life. It was a tall, shapely, white-clad phantom wreathed in the setting sun, and he could not but help but suck in a tiny, quivering gasp as his eyes narrowed and strained in wonder to drink up the silhouette face, the white, flowing gown, and the lustrous, long hair.

A goddess had stepped down from Valhalla to grant him an audience, and here he was, laying back against the boards of an old gazebo like some loutish, slovenly oaf. He sat up, then stood shakily, as the woman trod with carefree grace up to the gazebo, and then walked onto the creaking old boards.

Now he could see that the beautiful ghost, the goddess, was in fact a flesh and blood woman. But what a woman! Her skin was a lustrous pearl white, having the appearance of silky smoothness, and her hair was such a true, deep, lustrous black, it nearly shown blue. The lips were full, pale, and delicate, and the teeth were straight and perfect marvels.

But it was the eyes, those fathomless deep wells of glittering sparkle, that caught the fires of his heart, and the bottomless well of his infernal lust, and drove him to maddened heights of infatuated desire.

He fell to one knee, putting out his hands, and taking her delicate fingers in his own, began to plant them with kisses, imploring her to marry him, to make love to him, to rule him and master him and be his own forevermore.

And it was this image that was cruelly shattered by the slicing buzz from the desk of Mrs. Cove, as she rang him repeatedly, telling him his three o'clock had just sauntered through the office door.

Irritated, his head swimming with the fullness of the pills, he got up and stormed out the door, and down the hall, telling Mrs. Cove that, "One ring, Mrs. Cove, will be sufficient from now on." He realized he might have looked a bit frightful just then, and abruptly turned toward the little row of chairs to get an eyeful of his patient.

She was seated before him with her hands clasped on her little purse, wearing a dark coat over a plain dress. She was, in every sense of the word, typical of young ladies of today: short, bobbed hair, a ridiculous hat that looked like it was torn from the still-warm body of a flapper just overdosed on morphine, and a string of pail, imitation pearls.

Bee-stung lips.

Heavy eyeliner.

He felt a tremor of boredom, of sameness, and then said, "Hello, I'm Doctor Tanzler. Will you step this way, please, Mrs. Steinmetz?"

He motioned in an "after you" fashion, and she said, "Oh, it's *Miss* Steinmetz. I'm not married."

"Oh. Hey, I bet you're one of them 'independent', freewheeling types. See, I had you pegged right from the start!"

She laughed. His medication was taking him for a few witty ups, and later would leave him on a crushing down. But right now he could ride the wave and feel good until this last appointment was finished.

He followed her into his examination room, and directed her to hop up on the table. She was young, by the looks of it no more than twenty. He realized, for the first time, how frail her skinny body was; how, beneath her clothing, she must have looked little more than a waif. He felt a twinge of revulsion; he liked women to be well-proportioned, not starved to skin and bones.

He said, "The problem, young lady, is that you aren't eating enough. I've seen this sort of thing before: young girls worried that they're going to get too fat, and the boys won't pay any attention to them. Well, let me tell you,

Miss Steinmetz, that a well-rounded diet, combined with proper rest and exercise is the only way to physical well being.”

She looked at him with a little surprise, before stating , flatly, almost curtly, “No, Dr. Tanzler , the problem is, is that I am dying. I have cancer. I have maybe six months to a year to live.”

They were sitting in his office now, him poised behind his desk, and her still staring alertly with haunting eyes, that now again darted toward the shadows as if awaiting the coming of the Grim Reaper in a swirl of darkening dust.

“And so, you say this cancer is inoperable. Well, whoever told you that ought to have his stinking head examined, because, I tell you, there is nothing that isn’t possible where the human mind, and the human will, is concerned. You’ve had x-rays taken? I thought so. Have they been checked by a qualified specialist, though? That’s what I would like to find out. Some of these fellows, Miss Steinmetz, operate like they got their degrees out of a cereal box.”

He was droning on now to make himself feel a little less absurd, a little less stupid; there was something about this young woman that fair set his teeth on edge. He had been slowly drinking in the features with a detective’s minutia: plain face, aquiline nose, large eyes, high cheekbones. He looked at the nostrils to see if they flared.

She was wearing too much makeup, was either trying to hide bruises, or perhaps she really was as seriously ill as she claimed, and she was trying to bring color back to a complexion that had grown white as new paper. Otherwise, she seemed to be a fairly common girl from the lower middle class. He also thought it quite likely that she was a Jew, and the idea brought an extra fillip of distaste to him.

“Doctor, to be quite honest, I’m ill much of the time. I have pain wrack my body much of the time...It gets so bad I can hardly muster the energy to get out of bed some days. And I can keep little food down. I’ve lost twenty-seven pounds in the last three months, and the pain just keeps getting worse. I’ve been to the hospital, but they can do nothing for me. My family has done all they could, but I lost my job as a seamstress and now I feel like little more than an added burden to them...”

She trailed off , looking distressed, and her eyes fell to the floor as she hung her head slightly sideways. She had well-formed ears, he reflected, and then, folding his arms across his chest, he asked, “So, Miss Steinmetz, what, exactly, is it that you want from me?”

He already was half sure of the answer.

She started slowly, letting the words tumble out in a halting, cautious fashion. Her voice had a high, ringing quality to it, making it seem a little hollow, and a little musical, both in the same strange stroke.

"I...Well, it's just that the pain gets to be so unbearable at times, that I thought that maybe you could prescribe something to me to ease it a little. Make it a little more bearable...People tell me you're the sort of doctor that could be trusted to help a person with a terminal illness. If that person was in serious pain."

Ah, here it is, he thought. Now we've gotten to the crux of the matter.

"So", he intoned, leaning forward and peering at the young woman through eyes that had narrowed to slits, "You think you can just waltz in here and get dope, is that it? Well, let me just disabuse you of that notion right now, Miss Steinmetz. I'm not one of these guys you can come to, bleed out a few tears, and walk away with a script for morphine, or Demerol, or laudanum. I don't work that way. I play by the rules. Keeps me out of trouble"

And with that, he looked down at the yellow legal pad on his desk, and began to, absent-mindedly, jot down a few notes, saying, "Now, if you'll excuse me, Miss Steinmetz, I have a lot to catch up on."

She had not left, though, simply continued to sit there, staring at him incredulously, as if to protest the indignity of his slander. Finally, she said, "I am not a dope fiend, sir. I am a very sick woman that has come to you for help. If this is the way you treat everyone who comes to you for help, it's a wonder your patients aren't dying off in droves."

He looked up finally from his unimportant writing, sighed, sat back in his chair, and started to speak, but instead he leaned over, put his hands on his desk, pushed himself back and stood. He then went over to where she was sitting, asked her to take off her coat, which she did willingly, and then grabbed her hand, not unkindly, and pushed the sleeve of her dress back, examining her arm for tell-tale signs of narcotic abuse. He found none, and, satisfied that he had been mistaken, made forth with an immediate apology.

"You'll forgive me, Miss. You must understand, a man in my position has to be careful of who he prescribes certain drugs to. Word gets around, and I value my reputation in this town pretty highly."

She seemed a little relieved, a little more willing to relax now that he had admitted himself capable of a mistake. She said, "I understand your reluctance to prescribe medicine based upon a first visit. But the pain has been terrible for the past few days, and aspirin will do nothing to ease it

even a little.”

He thought that she did, indeed, seem to be rather ashen in the face. But perhaps that was simply the thick make-up she was wearing.

“Well, I suppose I can get you a little something stronger than aspirin”, he said, and reaching into the middle of his desk drawer, pulled out a pad of scripts, and hastily jotting down a prescription for powerful painkillers.

Good dope, if that was what she wanted.

He then tore it, placed his elbow on his desk, holding the slip in his fingertips, and said, “Now, there is one condition: first, I want to do a complete examination of you, and ascertain if your problem is as serious as what you seem to think. Now, I’m just an old ear, nose, and throat man, and I’m not promising miracles, but I want you to come in in a week or so, and let me have a thorough look at you. You say you’ve had x-rays, and this doctor *whatchamacalit* said you have six months to live... Well, I can tell you that that’s a bunch of hooey, because believe it or not, Miss Steinmetz, the desire to live is stronger than any illness your body can bring against you. Got that? You must tell yourself that every day, if you want to get better. It’s all in the head, see? Right up here, in this strange collection of tissue between our earlobes. Illness doesn’t mean squat, if this here is in working order. And pain? Well pain, Miss Steinmetz, is all in the mind, too. You just go right on out and speak with Mrs. Cove, and make an appointment for next week, and you and I will defeat this thing together.”

His talk had apparently done the trick, because her expression brightened, and in a few moments, she really began to beam. She said, “Oh thank you Doctor Tanzler! Why, these are the first encouraging words anyone in the medical profession has said to me in months.”

Suddenly, she did something that surprised and unnerved him very much. She stood up from her seat, threw out her arms, leaned over his desk, and caught his shoulders in a hug, the strength of which he would not have credited her with. He felt, for a moment, too stunned to say anything at all. She was blinking back tears as she took the prescription from him, and then bent over again, one last time, to hug him and peck him on the cheek. Tanzler was, suffice it to say, by this time was fairly taken aback. He said, “Yes, well, I appreciate the gratitude. Just remember, Miss Steinmetz, I don’t promise miracles. But I have some fairly radical treatment techniques that I think would be most profitable in this situation. You must remember to never give up hope.”

“I won’t”, she said, beaming, “Now that I know I have a doctor that really cares.”

“Yes, well. I do have some radical therapeutic practices in mind. Nothing too painful, I assure you. But, I think that you will find that you profit, considerably, from my expertise.”

As she started to turn, he rose, and asked her, suddenly, “By the way, Miss Steinmetz, what was it you said your first name was?”

“I didn’t. And, for the record, my name is Rosabelle.”

She half-smiled, and all at once, he could see the weariness peeping just below the surface of her too-smooth, made-up face; the eyes bagged a little beneath the porcelain brow.

She seemed positively elated as she stepped from his office back out into the hallway. He settled back in his chair, mesmerized, for a moment, by the possibilities inherent in this new encounter. Then, he sighed, took his feet from his desk, reached into the bottom drawer, took out a small green bottle with a silver spoon tied to the end, and retired, for a moment, to his water closet.

Part 2.

I was a child and she was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea;
But we loved with a love that was more than love -
I and my Annabel Lee;
With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven
Coveted her and me. --Edgar Allen Poe

It was somewhere in the vicinity of two weeks later that the young woman appeared again to keep her appointment. And a good thing too, for his mind had become consistently preoccupied with her as of late.

He was in the business, when not occupied with medical study, of whiling away the hours making mental pictures; constricting and collapsing skits and fantasies that seemed, at least to him, nearly every bit as satisfying as if he was actually living a sort of alternate life.

However, his mental fantasia had only in this case served to whet his appetite in an unappetizing, even morbid way. He found himself restless, irritable, until at last, when the appointed hour came, she was standing, once again, before him.

She looked much the same as she had before; a sort of plain, conservative dress speckled with gorgeous flowers, and a very ridiculous hat that all the young ladies seemed to be in a rage for. He thought, sourly, it made them look a little whorish, but he would never have told her this. Mrs. Cove was busily filling out her paperwork when, after ushering Rosabelle Steinmetz into his back office, he slipped back into the waiting room and told her she was free for the rest of the day, and asked if she could lock up.

He didn't quite like the half-accusatory look she shot him for a brief, uncontrolled moment, as she began to put away files, but he did like the sight of her gone and once this was accomplished he went back to his office, asked Miss Steinmetz if she fancied tea, and then went across the hall, past the examining room, and into the kitchen to put on a pot.

It was a special blend of imported herbal tea that he was convinced had healing properties, the likes of which had scarcely been guessed at by the established medical community. The smell of it, however, was a little sickening, a little nauseating. He half-fancied it reeked of something rotting in the cupboard. However his enthusiasm for its supposed healing properties far exceeded the personal discomfiture he felt concerning its olfactory elements.

He went, quickly, back into his office, where Rosabelle sat, and he felt a faint tremor of excitement as he greeted her, perched on his desk with his arms folded and realizing, for a moment, that his petty infatuation was as ludicrous as his faux authoritative bearing. In fact, he had never, in his life, truly felt comfortable in the presence of women.

Rosabelle. The name had to mean something, This name Rose had obsessed him for time out of mind, ever since it had come to him in the early hours of a gray morning while he tossed and turned in his bed, suffering under the killing agony of his burning stomach. Half in and half out of sleep, dosing under the effects of morphine. A vision had swam into the fabric of his waking life, a vision that he had had before.

"So, how have you been since our last meeting. Miss Steinmetz? Is the pain any more manageable?"

"Yes", she began slowly, "the medication has been a real blessing. My parents worry so about my health, but I told them I had finally found a competent doctor. And one that is willing to try different measures in order to, to help. The attacks that I have are ferocious, at times. I feel nauseous, and then I start to shake all over, and break out in a sweat. I get dizzy, and can keep no food down."

He knew it was probably, for the most part, simple psychological hysteria, but he said, "I understand, These things can place an especial burden on an individual, especially one as young as yourself, who, by all rights, should be in the prime of life, enjoying the fruits of good health. Tell me: what does your family think about your situation...Rosabelle?"

He wanted to establish familiarity with her, to make her trust him. It was going to be essential that she trust him.

She looked decidedly downcast, as her face drew in a little. "I'm afraid, Doctor Tanzler, that I have become a burden to them. I had to quit my job, you see, and my father is the only one right now that is working in my home. My mother makes some money sewing, but that is all."

"And, what was it that you did for work? Sewing?"

She smiled, and laughed a merry tinkling laugh that he found both haunting and a little strange in equal measure.

"Oh no, I can't sew a stitch. I was doing secretarial work at the business college. I am a pretty good typist, and I could handle all my duties, that was a cinch. It's just that I began to have spells at work, you see, and I actually fainted away on the job, fell over at my desk and everything. Scared the dickens out of Mr. Snodgrass, my boss, and he sent me straight to hospital. But what could they do? Every test I take indicates I should be healthy as a horse."

"Hm", he reflected, twitching his moustache and allowing a stray finger to pull at the corner of it. "It appears, Miss Steinmetz, if you want my honest advice, that you are, indeed, suffering from all the acute symptoms of hysteria. It is not fatal, but if left untreated, can be debilitating. Miss Steinmetz, I'd like to try hypnosis. Do you know what that is?"

She looked slightly apprehensive for a moment, before replying, "I have some vague idea, I guess. Shoot, everybody has an idea of stuff like that from the movies and novels. If you're asking me if I've ever been hypnotized before, of course not. I know a man that told me a hypnotist at a party once had him clucking like a chicken. It didn't sound very healthy."

He stood up fully, with a wry smile on his face, saying "I assure you, Rosabelle--"

"Please," she interrupted him, "call me Rose. Most everyone does."

"Rose. Rose, in this case I'm not going to plant any sort of suggestion in your mind that you would find lewd or unsavory," he said, knowing that a more cynical woman would find the words he had spoke to be slightly alarming, "I am going to work with you on the nature of your hysteria, where it comes from. Your physical symptoms, your pain and dizziness, are

the result of a mental, oh, a sort of mental blockage, you might call it. We're going to use hypnosis to take care of that blockage, and make you well again. And better than well, even. I tell you, I've had outstanding success with this method."

In truth, this was only the second time he had attempted this, and the first patient had been an ancient doddering man suffering from rheumatoid arthritis as well as incontinence, senility, and a host of other problems. The results had been less-than-remarkable, but the patient had been quickly sent to a rest home by his increasingly strained son, and so fate had intervened before a second attempt at "mental healing" could be undertaken.

"You know, Doc," Rosabelle said, "I thought you were just a plain old sawbones, but the more I listen to you, you sound like a headshrinker." He didn't respond to this, but dismissed any doubt she may have been experiencing by going to his cabinet, pulling open the drawer, and retrieving his stethoscope.

"I am an old sawbones, as you so quaintly put it, Rose. But I am also a gentleman of remarkable faculties, as you will come to find out in due course of time. I have traveled the width and breadth of this country, been around the world on holiday, and have studied at the feet of greater minds than mine. I know my business, the human body, inside and out. Now, I need to listen to your heart."

He directed out the door into the examination room, and she seated herself on the table. He ran the stethoscope slowly over her scrawny chest, not really listening, but liking the sensation of being so maddeningly close to her he felt as if he could dive with his fingertips into her skin. His head began to throb a little, as his breathing became, imperceptibly, more strained.

Finally, he could detect the susurrations of her vital muscles, and all the while he admired the gentle slope of her bosom, and the radiating coolness of her clothed skin. Next, he went to the cabinet and obtained a tongue depressor.

"Say 'ah' for me, Rose. That's a good girl."

She pushed her tongue through the softness of her pale pink lips, revealing her beautiful white teeth and accentuating the curve of her tight jaw line and the angle of her reed-like neck for him to store away, in the private filing cabinet of his mental index of favored images.

"Very nice. A slight redness is all. Feel any pain in your throat, Rose?"

"No. The pain is in my chest and in my stomach. Horrible cramps. Then my head begins to reel, and I feel faint and start seeing spots. Do you think it could be fatal, Doctor?"

Hysteria, or I'm a monkey's uncle. Classic Hysteria; albeit, a beautiful hysteric she is.

He threw away the tongue depressor, peered over till he was almost eye to eye, and then stared as deeply and as intensely as he could into the swirling galaxy of her gaze.

It was a strange collaboration of breaths, and her milky breath hissed inward and outward, swirling into his own harsher breathing. He wondered, for a comic moment, if she found the smell of his breath revolting, but realized she would endure it for as long as the examination took.

Next he took out his little rubber mallet and tested her reflexes, then grabbed the daintiest ankle he had ever held onto, and pushed her leg up , managing to catch a rare and wonderful glimpse of her slip, and feel the coarse material of her drooping stocking beneath his increasingly trembling hand.

If she took any notice of his growing excitement, she made no protest of it. Apparently she was as uncomprehending as he had assumed she would be. He felt a charge of power mixed with a certain guilty shame, but continued to wear the same determined, somewhat unreadable expression.

He managed, just for a moment, to brush the back of his hand against the exposed area of her inner ankle. In a fleeting second, he had managed to store away dozens of impressions; he could remember every distinct prickle of hair, the cool smoothness of the skin beneath, and the baby smooth texture of this delicious whiteness that covered her head to toe.

Finally, he had a look in her ears, and was satisfied, knowing that his mind would store these impressions later, in the quiet darkness before dawn, whilst he lay in bed and created a universe that was designed, solely, for the pleasure, comfort, and edification of Miss Rosabelle Steinmetz and himself.

“Breathe in.”

Her chest expanded. Her eyes stared upward into the recesses of the ceiling as if she were looking with x-ray vision, outward, at the sky and points beyond.

“Are you feeling a little more relaxed?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now, I want you to begin at your toes. I want you to clench your toes tightly, and then unclench them. I want you to relax. Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Just relax, and let go. Now I want you to feel the relaxation move up your ankles and calves. I want you to clench those muscle groups tightly, and then relax them. Feel

the relaxation spread like a slow, steady wave up your legs, to your hips and thighs. I want you to relax those muscles, those muscle groups. I want you to next relax your abdomen. Clench the muscles together tightly, and then just let loose...”

As he talked his voice took on a slow, steady, somnolent quality that he knew was like an easy, comforting drone. He was well-practiced in this aspect of hypnosis.

Her face had slackened somewhat, as her chest kept up a steady, easy rhythm. Her hands, which had been folded across her chest, were now at her sides, and her voice took on the slightly bewildered tone of one who has just awoken from some deep dream or reverie.

“Good. Now, I want you to concentrate on a set of stairs, alright?”

“Okay.”

“I want you to picture that you’re walking down a long staircase, and at the bottom of the staircase, you see a dazzling white light. You take one step down the staircase, and you feel your burdens, your cares and worries, begin to lift a little at a time. With each step, they begin to lift just a little bit more. Can you see yourself doing this? Walking down this staircase?”

She paused for a moment, then said, in a little voice, “Yes.”

“Excellent. Now, I want you to go slowly down that staircase, until you feel yourself bathed in this white light. The farther down you get, the brighter the light will become. It’s a healing light, and it washes all your cares and worries and troubles away with it. Are you walking down that staircase now, Rose?”

“Yes, I’m almost to the bottom...and it feels wonderful.”

He smiled, his confidence beginning to climb steadily with every drowsy syllable she uttered.

“Now, are you completely bathed in this brilliant light?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You’re doing very good, Rose. An excellent...” He trailed off letting the last words fall into the empty air. He stood, in his slippered feet, and paced the room a little, his hands behind his back as he continued to speak. He went to the window, and absent-mindedly parted the sheer drapes, and looked down the street as sunset painted long peach-colored stripes of light and shadow across the road. It was beginning to settle into twilight, his favorite time.

“Now, I want to tell you that that light that you see is the holiest, most blessed light in the world, and that that light heals all wounds and all troubles. Nothing bad can enter into that light, and nothing bad can come

out of it. It is the light of God. You do believe in God, don't you?"

"Yes. Yahweh. Adonai. The First and the Last."

His head shot back to where she lay on the divan, and a cold feeling suddenly gripped his spine. Now, here was a girl more sophisticated than he had first assumed. Using these not often used names for deity gave him a little turn.

It was intriguing.

"Ah, you know the true names of God. You've studied theology, maybe?"

She seemed confused by the question, but answered, "No. But I was brought up a Catholic. I was told to never take the Lord's name in vain."

Pause.

"I don't know why I said them."

He continued, frowning a little. His face usually wore a forbidding look at all times; when he was slightly consternated at something, it simply increased the effect.

"Well, yes, this light is God. And God is perfectly good, as I'm sure you'll agree."

"Not perfectly. God is a balance between darkness and light. You can't have one without the other."

"They didn't teach you that in Catechism, I suppose."

"No. My soul simply knows that to be true."

"We're not here to argue theology."

"I know."

He found himself in alien territory here. He was, for a moment, not beyond thinking that he was somehow being made a fool of. The voice had subtly altered in just a short moment, without missing a beat. The subject matter issuing forth from the mouth of his patient struck him as a little strange. Suddenly, he asked her: "You aren't by any chance a medium, or a mystic, are you Rose?"

"No. I'm not a Spiritualist, and have never even been to one. But I do believe that they can do some of the things that they say they can."

"Oh."

He continued, a little more warily, saying, "Alright then, I want you to take this healing light inside yourself. I want you to let yourself be penetrated, body and soul, by this healing light. This light of God. I want you to feel this light burn away all sickness and negativity; it burns away all doubt. You will fear no more fear, no more emptiness. All anxieties will be erased in this light. Do you understand?"

“Yes.”

“I can tell that you do. Now, I want you to look at yourself, and I want you to tell me what you see. Ahead of you, just ahead a few steps, is a mirror, a beautiful full-length mirror in a golden frame. It shines like a precious crystal in all this light. I want you to approach that mirror, and I want you to tell me how you look. I want you to see how healthy, and happy, and radiant you look.”

She said “Yes, there is a mirror. Oh, it’s surface is so beautiful. It looks like a sparkling stream. I can see shifting patterns of light in the mirror...look like faces. Oh my, it looks like all the faces I’ve ever seen in my life.”

The voice became a little less slow, a little less drowsy; now, there was a perceptible concentration, or perhaps, a sense of greater urgency in it. Her eyes fluttered beneath their lids as her breathing began to quicken.

“It’s amazing. It’s the most beautiful thing that I’ve ever seen in my life. Oh, the colors are magnificent...”

He paused again, a little overwhelmed at the way in which her mind had managed to rest control of the guided imagery away from him. He asked, “Do you see your face in the mirror?”

“Yes. And I look so beautiful. Oh, I’m not trying to be haughty or vain, but I can see all the inner beauty here. I have a lot of beauty inside myself. Inside my soul.”

He said, gently, “I know that, Rose.”

“But I can see more than that here. All the beauty and ugliness in the world at once. It’s like it’s swirling around me, and I can see all of it at one time.”

“How fascinating. Tell me: what do you look like, when you see yourself in that mirror?”

She became very quiet for a moment, and then said, in a tiny voice that was her own yet distinctly different in inflection:

“I see death.”

“No, you don’t. Your mind sees death. Your soul sees life. Do you hear me? You must learn to look in that mirror and see life, right now!”

She seemed confused for a moment, as if the weight of his words weren’t enough to shake the convincing illusion of herself as death incarnate. He was, truly, unnerved now, and he wasn’t a man given to losing his cool.

“I can hear them”, she said.

“Hear? Hear who?”

“The dead. I can hear them. I can sense them all around me. They want

me. They want to hold me. They want to love me. Do you know that the dead speak? That they still love, even after they have crossed over?"

No he didn't. and he didn't believe a word of what she was telling him. He did believe, however, more than anything, that her mind, and not her body, was responsible for her problems.

"Okay", he said, "I'm going to bring you out of it. I am going to count backward from ten, and when I get to ten , and snap my fingers, you're going to awaken, and you're going to feel better, more healthy and relaxed, than you have felt in a long time. You're going to feel like a new person, altogether. Okay, ten...nine...you're coming up slowly...just , relax...seven...six...five...four...relax, just keep breathing normally...three...two...one. Okay, now: How do you feel, Miss Steinmetz?"

She looked lovelier than any image he had ever seen in his entire life. She smiled, yawned, and then sighed, "I feel ...incredible. Peaceful. Oh, thank you Doctor, I feelwonderful."

She reached over and embraced him, and, although he did not know it at the time, for him, it was the beginning of the end.

Part 3.

And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
My beautiful Annabel Lee;
So that her highborn kinsman came
And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulcher
In this kingdom by the sea. --Edgar Allen Poe

Whatever it was he had managed to effect in her, with simply a few sessions of touch and go hypnosis, the results, as far as her family and acquaintances were concerned, were nothing short of remarkable. Her appetite was vastly improved, her color started to return, and she seemed to have a new appreciation of life, and her surroundings. Her family, such as it was, was delighted, and her appointments with Dr. Tanzler began to increase.

So too did his feelings regarding her.

She became a regular fixture around the office now, much to the chagrin of Mrs. Cove, who took a very dim view of what she took to be an incipient romantic courtship. But Dr. Tanzler paid her dismissive looks little mind. At this point, he was too content with the way the situation had progressed since first he had met Rose Steinmetz.

The hypnosis became easier, more conventional as time passed. Rose proved to be the ideal subject, and there was no more talk of death or visions of such, as there had been during the first session. Often she would slip into pleasant memories of childhood: playing in the backyard, visiting a fair, riding her first pony. At these times, Carl simply humored her recollections, all the time probing for that essential root cause of her hysteria. He could find little, but resumed his studies of the mind nonetheless, in the hopes of unraveling the mystery of Rose.

There were those days, however, when they simply didn't even bother with the hypnotic therapy, but whiled away their time together in the overgrown garden in back, sitting together on the little bench amidst the circle of stones, and watching the sun set behind the trees.

It was during one of these occasions when, quite suddenly, she had broached the subject of marriage to him.

He had, at first, thought the notion to be absurd. Who was he to get married, at his age? And with his peculiar habits, and eccentric disposition, he'd make a fine husband, wouldn't he? He certainly didn't think so, and told her:

"You've got some very silly notions in your head today, Miss Steinmetz. Now, let me disabuse you of them. For starters, I am a doctor, Miss Steinmetz, and you are my patient...there's nothing more to it. Understand?"

She sat at his feet, her legs bunched under her in the tall grasses. She didn't, at all, believe him.

"You're just taking yourself far too seriously."

"Professionals take themselves seriously, Rose. But in answer to your query, if, indeed, a legitimate answer is what you were looking for, I must confess, I have no desire to get married to anyone."

He swatted a fly that was busily circling his face. Already the sun had dipped quite low in the distance, painting the crepuscule colors of a growing nightfall against the deep bloom of his rose garden.

"I don't mean married now, silly," she said, her voice falling a little, as she stared ahead into a swirling, growing knot of shadows among the trees

that were rising up from the bushes surrounding them. "But, maybe in a year. I am serious. I really think that you and I should get married."

Suddenly, she turned around, looking up at him.

"I love you, damn it. Do you love me?"

Pause.

"More than you could ever imagine. Yes. I love you too. But, I am afraid, if we are to be together, it cannot be as man and wife."

"And why not?"

Pause.

"I am not marriage material, that's all. I think you should realize that by now. I don't want to hurt you, but I think that you are a very passionate young lady, and I am a very foolish old man. So."

She turned, suddenly, sat up, and said, "I think that you're a very foolish old man, too. I mean, you have someone who loves you, very much, and you treat it almost as if it were a nuisance...at least, you treat it as if it were an additional burden, instead of a blessing. Can't you ever be thankful for anything?"

He didn't know what to say, at first, and then said, "I am thankful for a lot of things, really. I am thankful for the wind and the sun, for the rain, and the birds that sing. But, I tell you, getting involved with me would be the last thing in the world you would want. I've been alone too long."

"Exactly the reason it is time for you to be married now, and stop being so alone. I won't take no for an answer."

"I know you won't. But you must. However, if you insist on acting this way, I suppose it is going to be up to me, as your physician, to humor your erratic moods and eccentric impulses. Kiss me."

He picked her up into his arms, and kissed her passionately then, for the first time, relishing the sweet warmth of having her in his arms. Above them, the darkening sky seemed to stretch outward into a deep ocean-like infinity, and each cloud bore the gentle, restful shape of a sleeping pillow.

He found himself, all at once, happy; it was an unusual state for him to be in, and he wondered at it. He then realized he was in love.

It was some short time later that she decided that he had to meet her family. It was not a situation he relished, but he realized, if he were to be married to Rose, it was one that he was going to have to tolerate. The family themselves, he understood, were absolutely thrilled with him. Not only had he healed their daughter, but she had managed to hook him as a husband, and he was a very wealthy, very prominent citizen in their small town. It

was almost, from their standpoint, too good to be true.

They lived in a modest one-story house in a working class neighborhood. The father, Joseph, he took it, worked on the loading docks at a factory. The mother and the sister stayed at home, and the young son did odd jobs, and was something of a miscreant. He couldn't be bothered to remember everyone's name, but he addressed them with the proper, cordial, "Sir" and "Ma'm". The mother was a large-boned woman with a tired face; the sister was a near carbon copy of Rose, but less appealing for all her youth. The brother sulked, ate little, said next to nothing. This last fact didn't bother him in the least, and, in fact, he later reflected that it made the whole evening that much more pleasant.

The soup was good, full, and spicy. The father ate with a relish, wiping the fat lips under his waxed moustache, and looking for all the world as if he wasn't used to using anything other than his shirtsleeve to wipe his mouth. The mother was more mannerly, but still seemed a trifle put-off by having someone with so lofty a reputation as himself seated at the table.

She spent the evening forever fussing over him, asking if he needed anything, what he thought of the fresh baked bread and salad. He was on his best behavior, and by the time dinner was finished, they all felt so comfortable with him that they repaired to the parlor to smoke and enjoy each other's company.

"So, Rose tells me you're thinking of making an honest woman out of her."

He stopped for a moment, puffed his cigar, and said, "I think she has finally convinced me, Joe. Understand, I'm an old fogey at heart...A real loner. When she asked me to marry her, I didn't know quite what to say."

"Just say yes. It'll be a pleasure having you in the family."

Then:

"Say, Carl, what religion are you, anyway?"

Silence.

"I don't suppose I'm very religious. I've never really given it a lot of thought."

"Well, you want to be married in the church, right? You're going to become a member?"

"If you mean join the church, I hadn't really considered it."

Rose and her mother exchanged glances, and she leaned over, patting his arm, saying, "He's just fine with the church, aren't you Carl?"

"I suppose so," he said, a little confused at the sudden turn of the conversation. "I mean, I'm not sure I really believe all that business about

the death and rebirth and all that, but I suppose it does offer society something in the way of stability for people.”

Rose’s father looked confused for a moment, before saying, “Are you telling me you’re an, ah, an *atheist*, Doctor?”

“An atheist? Well, I’m not sure. I guess I would label myself as something of an agnostic, if I was to label myself at all. I’m afraid at this point in life that I’m forced to contend with the idea that all ideas of the spirit, or spirits, are nothing more than rubbish.”

“Rubbish? You think the idea of an eternal soul is...rubbish?”

“Yes, I suppose I do. Medical science has never been able to prove the existence of anything beyond the cold, hard facts of nature, and I must concur with science.” He sucked at his cigar reflectively, before noticing that Rose, all of a sudden, looked horror struck at what he had just said.

“Is something the matter, my dear.”

He then looked over at the mother, who seemed suddenly to be very downcast. Then his attention strayed back to good ol’ Joe , whom he felt, wrongly it now seemed, could be counted on to always keep a level head. The man was turning scarlet above his collar.

“Sir,” he began , drawing in and out a gusty, ragged breath, “Sir, I am afraid I cannot allow my daughter to marry an atheist.”

There was a suddenly silence, broken only by the heavy tread of her younger brother coming down the stairs. He stopped on the stairs, peeping out from behind the wall at his family. Behind the brother, Rose’s younger sister stood at the top of the stairs.

Suddenly, Rose jumped up and ran from the room, leaving the rest of them sitting in a horrified silence. The brother seemed to be smoldering on the staircase, his eyes boring into Tanzler like twin jets of pure fury. He didn’t know about the sister, but it was a fair guess that she was upset as well. Probably upstairs crying.

He got up, pulled himself up with dignity, and said, “If you’ll excuse me.” he went outdoors, where he found Rose sitting on the porch, inconsolable.

He reached out to touch her and she jerked away, walking, almost running across the lawn, and he followed. She turned on him suddenly, her eyes wild with rage and tears streaming down her face, and said, “Why did you do that? Why in the name of all that is holy did you do that? Why is it that you feel the need to sabotage everything in your life? Don’t you love me the way I love you?”

He didn’t know how to deal with this, and, to be perfectly honest, he

didn't really want to. He said, "Perhaps I had better go."

"Yeah."

"Rose. I do love you. I love you very much."

He grabbed her suddenly, and was in tears. They stood, like two crazy people, in the middle of the street weeping, while her family came out slowly onto the porch, looking heavy and perplexed.

It was later, as they met in the park at sunset, that he noticed how drawn and old she seemed, suddenly. She had been staring out over the water of the small pond as it created a prismatic shift of dazzling colored wonder in the last rays before twilight.

He put out his hand, gently; "Rose?"

She seemed for a moment, not to notice him, but stood very firm and erect, her strength seeming to grow out of some new place, centered in the innermost recesses of her being. Her face, he noticed, seemed to be working out the objective relative reality of some shifting, internal vision.

"So many faces," she whispered to herself, watching as the undulating rivulets of water winked in the flowing, dying streaks of sunlight. "So many tortured souls crying out for release...Can't you see them?"

Suddenly, her head shot around, and she saw him, framed in shadow. Cold tears streaked down her thin cheeks, and then they embraced.

He held her, as madly and as passionately as he had ever held anyone, and felt her mouth open across his. But it was cold, and suddenly, quite dark.

Part 4.

The angels, not half so happy in heaven,
Went envying her and me
Yes! that was the reason
(as all men know, In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee. == Edgar Allen Poe

It was soon after this that Rose's condition began to deteriorate. It had started off with an increase in her "nervous spells", and had culminated in several nights of intense depression and fear. Tanzler had hypnotized her several more times, but the sessions seemed to be losing their effectiveness;

in fact, her family seemed to think they were making the situation worse.

“She goes to that lousy, phony headshrinker, and what happens? She comes back and she looks like death warmed over. You can’t even talk to her anymore, she just shuts herself up in her room , and cries all the time. Last night, she said she thought there was something clawing at her window, trying to get in. I tell you: If anything happens to her Imelda, I’m holding that quack responsible.”

During these moments, Rose’s mother would simply cast her eyes down at the floor, busy herself with her knitting, and look worried. She would tell her husband (who had started coming home smelling of alcohol more and more frequently) that she would probably “get over it”. It was, however, a no-good situation, all the way around. Her parents obviously would never approve of Carl Tanzler, and he, in turn, was as ambivalent in his affections toward her as if there was something wrong with his mind; as if he had a split personality. She was caught in the middle, feeling disgraced, confused, and abandoned.

She began to grow pale, and stopped eating. Depression gripped her every step, and she grew weaker, more silent, with every passing day. She had abandoned work, and her family simply took up the slack, nursing her in her increasing, baffling illness until she was a veritable invalid in her home. She left only for her therapy with Tanzler, and he knew that, eventually, that must come to an end.

He had already decided that he would see her at her home, if necessary, and he had already made motions to do so when he got the news that Rose had been committed to an asylum. It had rocked him to his foundations when her mother had called, but he swore that he would be around to visit, not really knowing when he could bring himself to do so. The experimental hypnosis had been going nowhere; she had failed to even be hypnotizable lately, and they had spent whole afternoons simply sitting quietly together, in the deepening gloom of sunset.

She often spoke , now, as if there was another, malignant presence with her, and the suggestion put his teeth on edge. She might very well, he knew, have an inoperable brain tumor.

He told her mother (who instructed him that appearing at the house was the last thing he wanted to do) that he wanted to visit, as a concerned friend, and she relented at this, giving him the name of the private sanatorium (How did they afford it?, he wondered), a small place about an hour’s drive north.

It was a dark, overcast day when he made the drive up to the Chester P. Holloway House, a two-story building that housed, at most, twenty patients. Some of them suffered, he knew, from mental retardation; the rest could be counted on to be the same general assortment of neurotics, hysterics, Napoleons, and other delusional madmen. And his Rose would be there, too. His Rose.

He went up to the double door, tried the buzzer, and heard a grating voice through the intercom say, "Yes? Who is it?"

"It's Dr. Tanzler. I'm here to visit my patient, Rose Steinmetz."

Pause.

There was a brief rattling of keys, and the door swung open. A beefy-looking attendant in a white uniform showed him into the foyer, and up to the desk, where a large, heavy-faced nurse sat brooding over a logbook, and eyeing him suspiciously.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Tanzler. I'm here to see Rose Steinmetz."

The nurse looked down at her log, and then looked up again with the same tired, bored, half-apprehensive expression on her face. She said, "Okay, looks like we have you scheduled here for two o'clock. You're early."

She said this last bit as if he had committed some sort of institutional faux pas, and then said, "Harry, will you please show the Doctor *Stanzler* back to the day room please. Everyone should be out of their rooms now."

He followed the hulking attendant out of the foyer and into the back hallway, turning a corner with him silently, and to a locked door with a window that was reinforced with chicken-wire. He unlocked this door with his large, jangling collection of keys, and Tanzler was let into the day room.

It was a bright white room with a collection of chairs and ratty old couches, a few magazines spread over various tables, and the persistent, mellifluous sound of an old record pumped through the intercom. Rose sat, nearly motionless, in a corner of the room by herself, with a look on her face that said she had long since ceased to see the world in the same way as ordinary folks.

Scattered around the room, in varying, nearly-inert clumps, were a collection of mental half-wits: one woman mumbled to herself, ceaselessly, in a manner that he found quite unnerving, her voice rising only intermittently to deliver a rousing imprecation to Jesus (whom she seemed sure had nothing better to do than to listen to her babble on). To the left of her, a tall scarecrow of an individual was bent over what looked like an old sock stretched across his skinny, bird-like hands. Now and again, he would

mutter to the sock, and speak back in a poor attempt at ventriloquism; a weird, warbling pseudo conversation composed entirely of gibberish.

The other denizens were much less mobile, and seemed to be, for the most part, on the high side of eighty. He went to Rose, knelt down in front of her, and said, "Hey there. Remember me?"

He saw, for the briefest moment, a flicker of recognition cross the face, and then the features settled back into a weird, languid torpor. She had lost even more weight, and her face now had the drawn, scarecrow visage of one that was staring into the abyss of starvation. He sat beside her, catty-corner, on an old leather couch.

"So, this is what has become of us, Miss Steinmetz. Well, I'm afraid this won't do. You have to tell me what's wrong with you, how I can get through. I know you're still in there, Rose. I know I can find you again. It's just going to take some time."

He considered. Perhaps there was something physically wrong with her brain. For all he knew, the events of the past few months--the hypnosis, the quarrel with her family, calling off the marriage, and so on-- had really nothing whatsoever to do with her present condition. Perhaps it was something that medical science simply couldn't account for. He was, for the first time in his professional life, utterly baffled.

"Rose, Rose, if you know who I am, will you please, at least, have the common courteousness to acknowledge that I've come a long way for you? told you once, I think, I would go to any length...well, and I guess I made a mess of things, in that respect. But I am here now. And I'll fight for you as long as it takes."

He leaned forward, looked into the face, and saw her eyes soften and well over for an instant. The lips began to work slowly, and he could hear the voice come in the fashion of voices that have grown rusty through disuse.

"I-I know who you are. But it doesn't matter."

He shot forward, said, "Rose. Rose, why doesn't it matter, Rose? Why? I love you, and you love me. Why doesn't it mean a damn?"

Tears began to trickle from her eyes, and she said, "Because I'm lost. All is lost. Futility."

He felt a sort of implacable rage mixed with love grip him, and said, "No, damn it, I told you long ago, when we first met, that there was no such thing as futility. Don't you remember? A man can do anything he sets his mind to, and that's a proven fact. And so can you, Rose. Rose, you've got to shake this thing away from you. Life is worth living, damn it."

She turned now, her empty eyes staring at him with a vacant soullessness that seemed to define everything that she was now, in this state.

“Life is for the living. I’m already dead, Carl. That was what the vision meant, the whirling faces...in the mirror. The dead want me, and it is they who won’t let go. I’m sorry.”

And he knew that she was. Suddenly, he couldn’t sit there any longer, but rose, touching her cool forehead with the tips of his fingers, and said, “I’ll return, soon.”

He drove home with tears streaming down his face. The visit had been a waste of time, a waste of gas, and he had sat with her for less than fifteen minutes. It hadn’t been a long drive, but he was economically-minded, and he was suddenly angry with himself.

He promised he would return next weekend. He kept that promise, but she was much the same, and though he stayed for almost an entire hour, he could coax but a few words out of her mouth.

It was a month later, though, that she was discharged. Not, as they say, with a clean bill of health, but apparently because the head psychiatrist couldn’t make heads or tails out of her, and felt any further treatment in the facility was bordering on the futile.

“She isn’t responsive to any treatment we have, and she doesn’t seem to be a danger to anybody. She needs to eat, and she’ll have to be looked after. My best guess is that she has simply, well, *given up on life*. And I’m afraid if she’s ever going to get better, she’ll have to be the one to decide that.”

Rose came back to her family’s house, ensconced, in bed, back in her room, and continued to dwell in the private space of her own mind. And she looked, physically, wasted.

When he heard that she was at last home, he decided that now was most definitely the time to try and make amends with her family--particularly her father. And so he decided that he would do what he could to ingratiate himself with them, and even go so far as to convert to their religion, if that is what it took.

He had spent some hours making a study of God, and hoped he could manage to pull off an old-fashioned con about where he put his trust in the future.

“Of course, that’s all it will be,” he told himself in front of the mirror, adjusting his tie. He still could never bring himself to prostrate himself in front of a deity that he was certain was nothing more than a figment of the primitive imagination. Fear was for the weak and the contemptuous losers,

and Christianity was a crutch.

What's more, he knew religion for the con job that it so inevitably always was when applied by those sainted criminals who stood in pulpits, or huddled in confessionals. He smiled: he'd put his faith in science, and his fear in the unknown.

He had called with just a quiver of apprehension, knowing that Rose's mother would be the one to pick up the phone, and in fact hoping that it was so. The father would be out at work, and that was good, too. The mother, as most women he found, was the easiest to work on.

"Hello? Mrs. Steinmetz? This is Carl Tanzler."

Silence.

"How do you do, Dr. Tanzler? It's been awhile."

She spoke slowly, her voice a murmur of cold hostility. He jumped ahead, anyway, saying, "Yes, it's Tanzler. You must know, I visited Rose in the hospital while she was there. Well, listen, I've been doing some thinking and some...searching, and I think I've been wrong about a great many things. Really. And I would like the chance to tell you about some of those things. I would also like to see her, if that's at all possible..."

There was a long silence. Then:

"You can come over in an hour. Bill won't be home until five, and I need time to straighten some things up. Just be gone before he gets home. He can't stand the sight of you."

He heard the receiver click, and the phone went dead from her end. He hung up the receiver, feeling a little better for having accomplished something, finally, and suddenly realized that he was going to have to make this play good. The best. He was playing for the life of his beloved.

He got to the place scarcely thirty minutes later, and knocked, feeling his pulse quicken a little as the door was opened and the drawn, haggard features of Mrs. Steinmetz filled the dark crack of the doorway.

She said little in the way of introduction, but motioned him inside. He fancied that he could, instantly, feel the deep gloom of the place, and shuddered inside of himself. He was followed, he thought, up the stairs by the mother, and he turned, holding his arm out, as if to ask, "Is this the room?", when he realized that Rose's mother was still downstairs. He walked to the door at the end of the hall, which was slightly ajar, and looked inside.

On a spare bed, in a room that seemed curiously devoid of anything that might be accorded as warm or friendly, Rose's brother sat on the edge of his

bed, his back turned to the door.

He had met that particular young man only once before, and he had instantly disliked him. A common thug; the boy had nothing serious going on upstairs. He quietly turned and went to the next door, finding it also ajar, and he pushed it in with the tips of his fingers.

At the side of the bed, Rose's sister Pearl knelt in what seemed to be solemn prayer, bent over a rosary. Her eyes were closed and her lips were moving slowly. The odor of the room, he noted, was musty and foul.

His eyes traveled over the child, until they rested on the image of Rose. It was an image that caused him to recoil in disgust, and broke his heart at the same time, for she did, indeed, look as if she would never stray very far from her bed again.

He didn't know what to do for a confused moment, so he waited. The girl finished her prayer, turned her head slightly, and looked startled, for he had approached so quietly (and she was so deeply in prayer) she had no idea he was standing at the door at all.

"Oh" she said, putting her fingers to her lips. She knew very well who he was, and the shock of seeing him suddenly before her must have sent her a little off balance. She got up from the rug unsteadily, saying, "Did Momma let you in?"

"Yes."

"Well, as you can see there has been no improvement with her for quite some time. It's almost like some sort of dreadful fever, but she never gets any better. She raves, and when she is not doing that, she goes on and on about death...about being dead. Doctors say it's all in her mind."

And with that, the young girl leaned over and grasped her sister's frail hand. It looked large and bird-like in her own smaller, darker hand, and he suddenly realized that Rose, if she survived this, would be old before her time. Between both palms, a small crucifix hung at the end of a rosary.

She suddenly rose, turned, and walked from the bedroom, leaving both of them alone. He turned to Rose, lifted her hand in his, found the icy frailness of it to be unnerving, and then bent on one knee, to peer into the wasted face.

"Rose", he said to himself, slowly. "Forgive me. How I've failed you."

Suddenly, he could see, plainly, written in the face, the lines and hues of death, standing out against her own drawn cheeks as if superimposed in the images of an old film. He understood, somehow, that he had opened the doorway, that death had claimed her, seeing her as a prize to be highly desired. He bent low over her, smelled the stale funk of her unwashed form,

and kissed her cool forehead.

“Sleep, Rose.”

Suddenly, behind him, he could hear Rose’s sister murmur. He turned abruptly and framed in the doorway he could see the sister, her fingers to her lips, the rosary still hanging from her knuckles, speaking softly to her brother, who stood in the half-shadow, glaring at Tanzler with murder in his eyes.

“I’ll go,” he said. He stood a moment, feeling the waves of cold violence emanating from the young man, and then walked past them to the stairs, taking each one slowly down, and feeling the daggers of hate prick his back.

He stepped out the front door, onto the rickety old porch, and into a sunlight that did little to warm the chill that had settled, like a sickness, in the center of his bones.

He had slowly drifted to sleep, the sonorous, slow tones of the eulogy still ringing, like a haunting lament, in his ears. Outside the wind picked up, blowing leaves and little gusts of dust and brittle scrap across the face of his bedroom window.

He lay in bed, fitfully; exhausted, yet unable to let himself sink downward into the healing balm of slumber. When he did, momentarily, fall off to sleep, his dreams were a short, brutal shock of nightmare that stabbed him back to consciousness rudely.

He sat up, feeling the tendrils of loneliness and timeless self-pity lick his skull. He had vowed to himself that he would see himself through this difficult period without the aid of narcotics or tranquilizers; indeed, since he did not at this time have any alcohol in the house, and he was damned if he was going to go out in search of some, he reasoned the best way to suffer was to do it soberly, with the pallid moonlight streaming through his dusty window pane, reminding him of the fruitless absurdity of God.

So this was it, eh? To love and lose, again and again, and to always remain, fundamentally, alone. He hugged himself, feeling the chill upon his being. Tonight he, himself, felt like death.

He quickly drew on his robe, and went downstairs, hearing not but the tick of the insistent clock, marking off the paces of time. Below him, the staircase fell away into a pool of shadow, as he slowly descended, knowing that time and darkness, and life itself, waited for no man.

Time is not our friend, he thought. But must it always be our enemy?

He had buried his only love today, closed away in an expensive lead coffin and put away into an even more costly mausoleum, the designs of

which he had personally overseen and the cost of which had come directly from his own pockets. As far as such structures go, however, he realized that what they had designed and built as the final resting place of Rose Steinmetz was, without a doubt, one of the most unique and beautifully constructed.

It bore a wonderful double door set with thick, stained glass, elaborate scrolling work upon the metal frame, and inside, was decorated as warmly as any young woman could ever hope for. The vault, inside of which rested the coffin, bore a golden plaque and two sconces on either side, where flower could be placed. Above, a beautiful portrait, rendered by a professional artist, hung in an ornate, circular frame; it bore the image of her to perfection, captured forever in the bloom of a youth she would always know.

One could sit on one of two facing davenports, and there was a beautiful low table between them, upon which rested a silver tray and empty tea set. Of course, these particular cups would never be drunk from; the porcelain teapot would never hold actual steaming water within, would never whistle to signal it was ready to water the contents of a cup. But she had liked her tea, and so it was.

Perhaps the strangest item was the great heap of toys (chiefly dolls) that had been brought in by mourners and placed in the corners of the tomb; these were from childhood acquaintances at first, later from sympathetic individuals who had read about the tragedy in the paper. Now they rested in a heaped pile, the more elaborate and elegant specimens posed carefully aside from the rest, with rag dolls thrown in an assorted bundle. These children's relics would weather the gloom and darkness and dust and mould within, day after day, year after year, decade after decade, until centuries had passed, and even he would have, long ago, been consigned to the ashes of infinity.

Beneath the portrait, beneath the gilded plaque, of course, was the stone vault, in which had been placed the coffin, in which reposed the body of his beloved. The sacred remains (or, at least, he held them to be sacred, if he was at all honest with himself) had been autopsied, but it had been to little avail: the cause of death was finally ruled as suicide, out of sheer bafflement, as much as anything else. The amount of drugs in her system did not seem to warrant a ruling of accidental overdose, nor could any natural cause of death be determined, conclusively.

(The coroner, Dr. Petrovich, simply shook his head in wonder. Never, in his twenty years of investigating sudden deaths, had he seen a young woman

that had simply died through sheer boredom with existence.

“It’s a neat trick,” he later reflected over drinks with a colleague.

“One for Ripley’s. Let’s hope it’s not catching.” Already he planned on writing an article to be published in a professional journal. Rose, he reflected grimly, would attain a kind of immortality in the august pages of the literature concerning human death.)

He had sat by himself in the little mausoleum that day, trickling tears pulling heavily down his cheek, mixing their saltiness in the dryness of his lips and throat. He had brought a bottle of cheap liquor with him, had filled one of the tea cups to the brim, and downed a swallow, choked, and then pulled small sips from the bottle. The setting sun had colored the insides of the shrine a pale orange, creating a shadow show of dim light and pools of gathering darkness. The dolls slept in their heaped mounds, and posed in their indifferent positions, oblivious to the passage of time and the accumulation of dust upon their dainty surfaces. The tears began in fervid earnest now, and he crumpled upon the sofa, holding his gray head in his hand, secure in the knowledge that no one could see him in this vulnerable, infantile state. Here he was alone, with the dolls, with the darkness; with his beloved.

He slowly sat up, unwilling to let himself fall asleep from drunken exhaustion, and be found, later, by the undertaker or (God forbid) a policeman. He still had some dignity, he supposed.

He stood up shakily, and stumbled toward the stone vault, placing his shaking fingers upon the cool, marble surface. He looked up, and directly above, the cool, portrait eyes of Rose Steinmetz met him in the darkness, this final image of her to remain seared into his brain for the remainder of his days. Well, no, damn it, it was not enough.

He caressed the cool marble, willing it, in his frustration, away, reviling it as an impenetrable wall between himself and what he desired, what he loved.

He could feel energy tremble below his fingers. Strange.

He pressed his palms tighter against the stone.

He then pulled his hands back quickly, as if the surface of the stone had suddenly scorched them.

He shook his head. No, it must simply be his imagination, or the drink. His exhaustion and grief, and a combination of other factors had conspired to play tricks with his mind.

He slowly moved his hands back to the stone, and then pressed again. Suddenly, he hissed, low and gutturally, and his eyes began to bulge.

It was unmistakable.

Below the stone, one could feel it; very faint, but unmistakable as a pulse through the soles of the palms, and gaining strength through the tips of the fingers.

It was the beating of a still warm heart; faint, but increasing in vibration the longer he held himself there. He felt a tremor move through him, and suddenly he was shaking from head to toe.

For one mad moment, the thought that she had been buried alive came upon him like a mania, and he fought the urge to push the heavy marble lid back from the vault, and open the casket to make absolutely sure that Rose was dead. Then, his reason returned, and he stumbled out of the tomb, shutting the doors behind him rather too quickly, securing the lock, and promising himself that he wouldn't return for many, many days. If ever. But he knew, for certain, that he would never honor this particular promise; would in fact, be unable to.

He had quickly, and erratically, driven home, the effects of the intoxication making him, occasionally, swerve. But he managed to pull his car into the garage sure enough, slammed the door behind him, and went into his study to brood in the darkness. To drink more, and to administer to himself a powerful opiate, the effects of which he needed to help stifle the sensations of grief and vacancy that now eclipsed him; that were stifling his being.

True, it had given rise to a morbid reverie of images the likes of which had haunted his tumbling nightmares until he felt himself amidst the darkened contours of a vast, dim room.

About him, as he crept on dreaming feet forward, he could see everything here as a representation of the ornaments and accoutrements of death and its celebration: tables became coffin lids, urns and vases were filled with rotting flowers and ash, the wall was decorated with *memento mori*, and skeletal remains decorated the mantle beneath a portrait of Father Time, as an immense grandfather clock of ancient age droned out the hour. Before him, lolling behind the filmy sash that covered an elegant window looking out over a gray, turgid world, he could see a faint female figure began to grow in the gently moving curtains. Moving, not because of some wind (there was no wind here, and there seemed damned little air) , but with a kind of strange animate life the likes of which could only be guessed at.

Disembodied, he moved over the rotting surface of the room, awash in the swirling motes of dust and matter which danced upon the cold gloom, and went to the woman.

Her face, her porcelain white face, held the pale, painted beauty of a graven image. So delicate and perfect in every rigid contour, he felt like he would like to take that face into the center of his being, etch it upon his consciousness in silver, and preserve it forever. Then he saw the terrible majesty of that beauty, and he was afraid.

He bent to kiss the lips, separated only by a thin filmy wisp of drape, and they were cold and lifeless; they felt like raw rubbery meat, and he pulled away, causing her to suck inward a little hiss of breath.

She began to swallow the thin drape, her throat bulging with the effort, the sickening rasp of her suffocation echoing miserably through the great, dim confines of this place that was neither life or death, but was both. He drew away from her as her face became shrouded by the transparent cloth, her features smeared and blurred in agony as she thrashed against the invasion of this strange, living cloth.

Next he saw himself as a young man, running over the fields of his youth on a gray, rain-choked day, and suddenly he stumbled and fell headlong into a moist trench in the earth, a massive pit that had been scooped from the ground as tall as two men standing one atop the other. Above, he could see the mountains of raw dirt that had been piled, blocking out the trickling light, as he tried desperately, to climb his way upward, to scale the watery clay, and only managed to filthy himself as he clawed away handfuls of the stuff in his gradual, tortured ascent.

He then heard a moist, crackling sound beneath him, and a smell the like of which threatened to overpower his senses wafted upward to his nostrils.

It was a moist, fetid, sickening stench; the stench of a putrescent sewer. The smell of old earth giving up its contents in one vomit of noxious, gaseous rage. Below him, he could see the floor of the pit begin to bulge outward.

Withered, stick-like arms thrust themselves forward, and the decayed husks of head and body were spat out to a kind of shambling reanimation. He began to claw the sides of the pit in a mad burst of sheer terror, looking back over his shoulder at the discolored, dripping, flyblown throng as they assembled in their communal grave, the rancid flesh of their beings giving off the morbid stench that they knew as their own existential stink.

Arms began to grasp him, withered sticks that once wore flesh like a beautiful garment, or an ugly ruined coat, and now knew only the curdled black fabric of decay. In grips of iron skeletal bone they pulled him downward, into the wretched blackness of their mad half-existence, before he finally succumbed and sat, choked of oxygen, in front of them.

Here they were assembled, in a strange mockery of living men, as a company of bedraggled, grotesque debasements. Silently, as if imploring him to join them in the bowels of this hell that was neither death nor life, but both. In the deepening gloom he examined the hideous waste of their features. Here and there, were the unmistakable faces of friends and acquaintances he had once known, individuals that had preceded him on this strange journey of transformation, this metamorphosis from life to death and back to life again. These phantom cocoons had, perhaps, lost their way, but they were here, with him, and demanded from him an audience.

Acknowledgement. Fellowship.

Suddenly, the wind above began to howl across the lonesome plains, and the dirt piled high above began to blow over into the pit, as a rumbling below, the angry voice of a cheated god, perhaps, set the ground quaking beneath his feet.

He realized he was being buried alive.

He was not one of them; not yet, at any rate. He turned, and like a man drowning in an ocean of earth, began to once again try with every effort of his being to fight his way upward, while dirt and foulness and dust and rot were rained down upon him, filling his throat and nostrils and covering his eyes and head until the world above was shadow, and there was no more light to see.

He awoke, his heart pounding inside his chest, and drew the covers tightly about him, realizing that he was freezing. The images of the dream still haunted the swirling shadows as his eyes adjusted to the bright moonlight pouring in from the window sash.

He breathed raggedly, letting the dream slip away from him as his consciousness fought its way back to some sense of normality. Still, he could not help but be moved beyond the ability of his mind to shrug off what his sleeping brain had concocted out of bits of real life and subconscious turmoil.

It was, in a metaphysical sense, much as he had long suspected. The dead were not simply the decrepit old husks of their former living beings, they were a new type of life; a metamorphosed vessel that demanded an answer to a question that, fundamentally, no one was quite sure how to pose. Was it that, irrespective of that essential spark of soul, the crawling, yeasty flesh, so much food for worms and insects, still itself held some forlorn hope of redemption? Did sentience live in the molecules of skin, in the fibrous make-up of the epidermis, in the coiling snakes of intestine that looped like

long, feculent worms throughout the pulsating organism? Perhaps that was what the dream, what his reality, was now trying, desperately, to signify to him.

He got up from bed unsteadily, still feeling the effects of the alcohol, yet able, now, in these wee hours of the deathly still morning, to come back to a sense of himself and his world.

He went out into the hall, looked down the darkened staircase. So quiet. Why had he wanted such a large home for, anyway? To impress his patients? For the sake of pride. All was, then, vanity.

He went back to the darkened bedroom, slipped on his trousers, and grabbed a pouch of tobacco. He then crept down the staircase without bothering to turn on a light, letting the moonlight guide his feet as they unsteadily made their way through his examination room, and out the French doors into the backyard, and into the circle of stone and weathered benches cast among old trees and slumbering flowers of his garden.

He could feel it, even as his hand slid down the banister. He could feel that perceptible pulse, that hum, that same bizarre energy that had crept through his rough palms as he had pressed them against the stone lid of the sarcophagus. It was like the beating of some obscure heart at the center of the earth, some vivid aliveness that only those who had stared into the awful, beautiful face of death could sense deep in the sensitive fibers of their fingertips. Maybe it was the rattling of a hundred million souls in Hell, or maybe the turning over in their graves of the restless dead. Whatever it was, and whatever its source, be it holy or blasphemous, natural or preternatural, he had heard its calling, and he knew.

The moon was a chilling giant in the deep blackness of the sky, as he felt his skin grown taut with the cooled-over temperature of early morning frost. The cold did not trouble him though, as he inexpertly rolled a cigarette and thrust it between his lips, hearing, in the distance, the high, lonely, mournful wail of a passing train making its way across America in the Midwestern night.

His garden was still alive in the frost; the flowers slumbered in their peculiar half-life, awaiting the first healing rays of the sun to spread wide their multicolored petals and accept the succor of the solar thrust as a life-giving boon. But now, only the moon and all of its lunar secrecies spread itself upon the glowing little earth.

He smoked. He listened. He could hear the hum of a thousand dirt-choked voices call out to him in pain, in loneliness, in a desire to escape their cloisters in crawling caverns and gritty crypts. He knew, oh my yes.

Whether it was the alcohol, his increasingly disturbed and near-hysterical psychological state, or the morphine he had allowed to plummet him further into the sacred, tranquil river of dreams and nightmares, of somnolent fantasies and turgid, apathetic wakefulness, he knew that they were, indeed calling him.

And as he smoked, and his eyes watched twirling clouds of nicotine circle upward into the chill sky, and shrouded and cooled himself in the rising sunlight that signaled the milky birth of a new dawn, he realized that he couldn't help them. Couldn't save all of them. And he spoke to them, to that insistent murmur, against the rustle of the trees, and the silence of the night.

He couldn't save all of them.

But he could save one.

Part 5.

But our love was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we
Of many far wiser than we
And neither the angels in heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee. --Edgar Allen Poe

Stealing the body had been the easy part.

He simply went in the dead of night, driving his car as surely and as steadily as if he had been off to the corner drugstore to pick up some eggs. Luckily for him it had been a moonless night, and the roads had been fairly deserted, except for the occasional frisky teenagers pattering along to love's desolate lanes.

It had taken some courage and some planning to screw himself up to the task, but once he had drunk several good dollops of hard whiskey, and taken a tablet of codeine on top, he felt his resolve steadily increase. He would utilize the faculty of his clinical detachment, and turn off whatever area of his conscious mind registered disapproval and disgust at the notion of committing what amounted to grave robbery.

And still, in the small hours of the morning, every morning, as he crested

the night's tide of dreams and returned to the half-crawling yeast of waking life, he could hear the low murmuring of voices, the sea swell that threatened, at times of overpowering silence to choke off his last bits of sanity. In response he had been keeping up a constant barrage of noise in his life: radio and phonograph helped immensely with this.

It had now been some weeks since first Rose had been interred, and the interim had seen a toll delivered to his medical practice. His patients began to detect a slight but perceptible change in his manner, so that his once good-natured brusqueness now seemed more like impatience. Anyone could see that his mind had been distracted lately, and most everyone who was within his close circle of contacts could reason why.

His membership and commitment to his freemasonic lodge was waning too; he, very often, had no real reason to show up to the meetings, and the charity work, which had once served to brighten his sometimes dour, unapproachable image in the community, now bored him intensely.

Sitting on the planning commission of this and that charity raffle or winter coat drive he could manage to maintain his composure and hold his impatience for only a few minutes at a time. Life was becoming insufferable; death was his new frontier.

Mrs. Cove, bitter old prune that she was, took no notice of any of this, and maintained her own stoic resolution to do her job and leave as quickly as possible by the end of the day. Better that, than sitting in the black shadow of her employer's deepening gloom.

Indeed, she wondered privately if her employer might not be suffering the effects of early senility.

"Poor thing," she said to her Lady's Christian Auxiliary Social Club acquaintances (many of whom held her in a disdain she could scarcely have guessed at), "he's had such a terrible loss lately. Loved that little girl like a daughter, he did. Of course, I don't think there was even a hint of any impropriety involved in his affection. No sir, not Doctor; he's as upstanding and decent a fellow as you would ever want to meet. Still, you have to wonder what business a man his age thought he had with taking up with a girl that young. Must have been pity, or something. Confidentially, even though she told me she was a Catholic, I couldn't help but think maybe she had a little Jewish blood in her. Family from the old country, you know. Conversos, I would imagine. Mind you, not that I think there is anything especially wrong with that sort of people..."

Invariably, when expounding upon some tidbits of gossip, or firing up outright lies to amuse herself, Mrs. Cove was chewing, cud-like, an egg

salad sandwich or some other dainty offered out free at the club meetings. She typically helped herself to as many as she liked, much to the chagrin of the other ladies.

However, most of them, eventually, decided it was no special loss to run short of *hors d'oeuvres* during the meeting, as the sight of Mrs. Cove chewing was enough to deaden most of their appetites anyway.

But he knew that in a city as small as Marion, Indiana tongues were bound to wag. Oh well, it was all the same to him. If he had lost interest in his practice, in his social obligations, and even, eventually, in the company of the living, it made little difference. His savings and investments were considerable, his body felt alive with the sensation of new possibility, and he knew his mind was sharper than ever.

More so: now it could seek out that small sound, that strange frequency from which the dead spoke still, with rotted lips, their tales of loss, and love, and the grave.

It had been with some trepidation that he had first slid back the heavy sepulcher stone, with the aid of an old crowbar, to reveal the casket waiting, cocoon-like, inside. His hands trembled, his breath blew before him in the desolate dark. He had brought an old, hooded lantern with which to see by. The lonely faces of the dampening dolls, grown musty from their long vigil in the tomb of his beloved, added an interesting counterpoint to his own intent features. Slowly, he managed to insert the curved tip of the crowbar beneath the crack of stone, exerting all his effort, not liking the gritty rasp of the stone as he managed, finally, with much exertion, to move the slab backward a darkening sliver.

Already, he was aware, dimly, of the fetid funk of death. Or, perhaps it was only his pale imaginings, grown heated under the influence of alcohol, and dope, and delirium. Whatever the case, it did not in the least disturb him, but instead became an olfactory nectar the likes of which astounded his senses to heightened awareness, to heightened excitement. Now he could feel his body tremble, and his heart began to pulse with the energy and excitement of his endeavor.

He exerted an increased pressure on the metal bar, the scraping rasp of stone growing louder in the absolute stillness. Below him, the widening black sliver began to increase like the opening of a sacred crack over the yawning chasm of damnation. To do the thing was the decisive act; afterwards, deviance could only thus be recognized as to a succumbing of the temptation that had cajoled him into committing this first, deviant sin.

Closer. Closer. The sepulcher lid was thrust unsteadily back, to reveal,

finally, the lacquered wooden surface of the casket beneath. His problem was now obvious: How was he to thrust back the stone barrier far enough to allow him access enough to open the casket and retrieve the body buried within? The heavy lid would fall to the floor of the tomb, possibly shattering, but even if it did not, he was not sure he possessed the requisite strength to enable him to push the lid back into place, and conceal forever the fruits of his midnight labor.

The only solution that he could see was that he would have to remove a section of the wooden casket, using pick and saw, and hope that he did not, inadvertently, do any damage to the body within. He was risking damaging the flesh of his beloved. But, in truth, hadn't death already rendered the beloved fillip of flesh that enclosed the pitiful pile of bones as nothing more than so much decaying matter? To dissolve, slowly, decade after decade, until nothing more was left but the few scrapings of dust at the bottom of the casket? After 10 or 15 years, the bones themselves, he knew, would begin to crumble.

It was dark in the house, lit only by guttering candles, as he made his way to the phonograph, carefully placing one of his favorite recordings of romantic melodies on the circular surface, and winding the crank until he knew the tension was at its peak. The music, preserved forever on the wax surface of the album, began to echo forth in the darkness, its sound swelling and undulating throughout the house. He felt, in an odd way, like dancing.

He walked across the living room in the darkness, letting the trickling dancing pools of candle flame guide his footfalls toward the bottom of the stairs. He grasped the banister with one trembling hand, looking upward into the dark of the first floor landing. Up there, wrapped tightly as a mummy in a protective covering of fine linen, his beloved object of devotion was waiting for him to come and acknowledge her, to give her life once more.

Slowly he began to ascend, his actions in the present ticking minutes seeming to take on the aspect of a very strange dream. Above, he could already smell the redolent bouquet of flowers, and the incense, and the heavy cloying perfume and disinfectant he had sprayed to try and mask the rancid stench of his macabre angel. To mask the stench of her.

The room was a dark, dancing shadow show of lighted candles, and, below him, he could hear the music spin its web of enchantment into the darkened recesses of this space that, tonight, was his, and his alone. Slowly, he gripped the doorknob, pushing the door open easily and slowly,

peering intently in the darkness as his bed came into view. And, in that bed, nestled beneath the covers, was what he had dreamed of on long nights when the wind had howled against the eaves, and the darkness had gripped him solidly within the cold clutches of its loveless embrace.

She swam into his vision, eating up his consciousness. Never, in a life that had, more so than many others, been marked by transgressions and little vices, had he ever committed an act that, he knew, were it to be discovered by the police, were it to be known to the wagging tongues and beetle brains of his own little community, would do more to blacken his name and earn him the reputation of a criminal degenerate, than any sin he had ever yet committed. Yet, inside himself, there was no feeling of remorse, or paranoia, panic, terror, or self-loathing; he was beyond all of these petty concerns.

He studied the sunken features, withered in their way, touched by the cold fingers of death. She had not been long in her casket, had not long laid in the dripping emptiness of an echoing tomb. He had, in fact, been astounded at the relative lack of corruption that tainted her features, had wondered to himself of the possibility of a miracle. After all, the incorruptible cadaver of the departed saint was a cornerstone of the Christian faith.

Now, leaning over her, grasping her stiff, cold hand in his own, he knew that, indeed, decay had disgraced her beauty indeed, rendering the loveliness of her angelic features a shadow of their former glory. The mouth, which had been stitched tightly closed, was withering with decay, and the cheeks had taken on a hollow stiffness that accentuated the skull beneath the corroding skin.

So, now he could stand here, and grasp the bony, clammy hand, and knead the poisoned flesh between his own fingers, and see for himself the slow ravages of time played out on the face that the angels stole from him. The eyes had begun to sink inward, the cheeks were hollow, the skull beneath the skin was reclaiming the form. Did worms crawl yet in her belly? He didn't think so.

"I would have moved heaven and earth for you, my love," he said, speaking to her finally, not liking the absolute stillness as the phonograph paused between musical numbers.

He suppose he wanted to dance; that would be a comic grotesquerie to top everything, he surmised, suddenly smiling coldly. The candles flickered around the room, a sudden draft threatening to extinguish them, to leave them both shrouded in a darkness that was threatening to engulf his mind as he stood there considering what he had accomplished this evening.

He was exhausted, bone tired to be exact, but his eyes refused to stop seeing the sacred form they now beheld. Tonight, he would lay next to her, his arms encircling the dead flesh to breath life back into the machine.

Wasn't the body a machine?

Wasn't it a vessel? A sacred vessel?

Hadn't he seen in a vision that the soul, once departed from the body, was freed not only itself, but the physical form as well? Hadn't the dead come to him, seeking understanding, seeking relationship? Seeking communion?

So many centuries moldering in the grave. They demanded more. They would have it. The living would see, in time, that the putrid multitudes and dry dust and faint echoes from the afterlife were calling out, beyond space and time and reason, for friendship. For inclusion, and love.

He began to slowly undress. It would, he knew, be a long while before he could accustom himself to the sickening sweet stench that arose from Rose as she lay beside him. It was already overpowering, despite the cautions he had taken, and yet, as he extinguished the candles, as he slipped beneath the cool covers with the woman he loved, and would always love, throughout all eternity, as his quivering fingers reached out to touch the dead husk and finally embrace it, and encircle it, and hold its stiff, lifeless form rapturously against his own, he began to realize that the reek of death was its own perfume, beyond even the sweet, husky smell of flowers withering in the midnight black.

A pulse of energy electrified his form, and he could feel life grow between them, as one, as he plummeted below into fathoms of blessed sleep.

It was some short time later, curled next to her in silence, that he began to have his vision of awakening her from death's dismal grasp.

It was not that the smell of the body unduly troubled him; even as he had prepared her, finally, for this final station, he had made sure to spray the body and bed and room down with disinfectant, and for the past several days had been collecting various bouquets of roses, cultivating an elaborate, multicolored garden around the bed. He would be cautious to change the sheets.

But there was a high, sickening stench, held only somewhat at bay by disinfectant, perfume, and flowers, that he found, at the very least, somewhat uncomfortable. He knew he would tolerate it, no matter how offensive or overpowering it eventually became.

The first several days had already elapsed, and she lay, like a pathetic

broken thing, sending up clouds of stench and drawing a steady stream of flying insects that he was horror bound to chase around the bedroom with a spray pump. He would, he assured himself, be meticulous with the care and propriety of the bedding. It would be necessary to forestall an infestation of carnivorous pests.

How long would the careful craft of the embalmer preserve her in this, admittedly, diminished state? He didn't know, but even now, with her lying cold and sickening sweet beside him, he could tell that the features were already slipping. Oh, the work of the mortician had been top-notch: he had made sure to select the most reputable funeral home for the internment, had been incredibly impressed with the lifelike image of her, motionless in her repose as her family and friends mourned in the relative gloom of the funeral parlor.

A soft, pink light had been thrown from an overhead on the casket, adding a further, surreal touch to the proceedings. It seemed, then, as if she could have stirred, sat up in her loveliness, and climbed from the casket to soothe away the sadness of her parents.

"She looks so good...so natural," her mother had said, and Carl had put his arm around her, assuring her that, indeed, she looked as young and vibrant as the day she first stood on the threshold of his home, ready for her first appointment.

Time, he now realized, as he rose from bed and went out into the hallway and downstairs to reflect over a burning, hand-rolled smoke, was really the issue now. Money was no object: he wanted money, and it came to him. He was no longer in the unenviable position of not knowing how to invest, deal with money, and generate capital. He was a man that, despite all the odds and circumstance laid out against him, had managed to do okay for himself.

No, as always, *time* was the issue; it was the enemy. He would fight time to save her, to save what remained of her, to sleep next to the old form, and feel that strange, residual energy seep from her moldering husk, and instill in his own molecules and fibers a sense of her renewed beingness, of that living force that did not depart with the spirit, but remained, in a larval state, gestating in the decomposing entrails of the cadaver as it lie in wait.

For...what?

He asked himself, Do the dead dream? Do they love?

The first act--the very first--was to ensure the preservation of the flesh, to the best of his ability. To preserve a semblance of form, to maintain the final image of Rose as long as possible. A brilliant man had once told him that the general rule, regarding decomposition of freshly embalmed cadavers, was

that the less exposure to the outside air a body suffered, all the better. Of course, perfectly preserved specimens had been disinterred before; the myth of the incorruptible saint was one he was well aware of, as was Rose.

If she had been buried, or immersed in water, the preservative aspects of the embalming process would not have been as nearly perfect as they were now holding out. However, the smell, he knew, might be far worse, and already it was starting to distract Mrs. Cove.

He stubbed out his cigarette, retrieved a pouch of tobacco from the dining room cupboard, and rolled himself a second. His fingers were trembling slightly, and he reminded himself of the necessity of curbing his consumption of highly-sweetened coffee and tea. Outside, the birds had already started to stir in the morning frost, as the world began to awaken to a new life.

Life, he thought, pushing the noodle of what that particular word meant and stood for around in the recesses of his steadily-waking mind. Could life be restored as in the pages of a cheap gothic potboiler, by the jolt of a galvanic battery and the application of a few electrodes? He didn't think so. At the very least, he could only approach a vague understanding of even the theory of such an operation.

No, the answer, he was becoming steadily certain as the milky light of morning painted the panes of the glassed-in porch, was in the strange interplay between mind and spirit. There, he knew was the true province of power, and accomplishment. For the mind, he knew, would always predominate over the body.

He had been, in his way, an intrepid explorer along the twisting pathways and avenues of the psyche. Possibility, to him, dictated and demanded that an intrepid adventurer choose that pathway, above all else, as the most pressing avenue of exploration.

Were it not possible, he asked himself, to retain the final image of his beloved forever, in the fabric of his consciousness, by preserving the flesh? The face? For, if reality existed, as he had long known, simply within the confines of the human mind, could it not be tricked into altering its perception of reality until, henceforth, that impression dominated and finally controlled objective truth?

He would go to elaborate lengths, he knew, to stave back the creeping horror of decay; to preserve the fetid cocoon from whence still beat a tremor of her old spirit. He would build here a world where, at the very least, her body would always be his. He was a crafty man, after all, and somewhat educated in the mysteries of the flesh, and the magic omnipotence of

dreams, and will.

He inhaled the smoke. The birds continued to chirp. Outside, a squirrel made its little, scampering way across the lawn, pausing for a moment to taste the air, to sort its senses for what could aid or endanger it, and then clawed, with a swiftness that was amazing and amusing at the same time, up the side of an old elm tree, getting itself lost for a few moments amid the dew-dappled leaves that were still choking from the deepening brown of Fall as they, one by one, begin to crumple and fall to carpet the earth. It was a moment, he reflected, as pure as any ever conceived, and he thanked God, in a begrudging manner, that he had allowed him to be so blessed this simple morning.

He would brew some coffee in a moment. He rose from the bentwood rocker, feeling the age in his bones creak, knowing that she still lay upstairs, waiting, like a macabre toy, for him to retreat from the boring obligations and responsibilities of the day, and to spend the evening with her. To invest in her again, a semblance of what previously, she had been.

To blow the breath of life in her. To kiss her back to wakefulness. To make her live again.

Live.

Mrs. Cove, her handbag under one arm as she unlocked the door that morning, entered with her usual gruff rattle of keys and stomping of old, weathered shoes. He was upstairs in his private library just then, going over a multitude of volumes in a wide, nearly dizzying array of various disciplines, trying to piece together a plan of action, a way to operate under the circumstances that was logical, methodical, and effective.

He had decided upon an initial trial of delving into occult secrets, into arcane truths that he had, casually, investigated himself upon occasion. It had never been serious research, but he had whiled away the hours with heavy books of mysticism and black magic, and a few of the most torpid treatises on the world of the parapsychology he had ever had the displeasure to peruse. He had also, he knew, gotten a hold of quite a lot of junk, and now it was going to take some doing separating the wheat from the chaff. But he felt confident enough in his abilities and intellect to be able to operate in that other world without danger, and he knew he had nothing to lose.

It had not been, especially, difficult making the preparations for the service that evening. He had gone to Madame Zemindar in desperation, hoping to be able to communicate more fully with Rose, to bring her soul back and imbue the body, again, with a tangible spark of galvanic energy.

The medium had looked at him flatly, stating, “Doctor, you’re an old friend, so I’m gonna be straight with you. What you’re asking is beyond my power to do. Hell, half of what I show people here is nothing more than careful tricks, and the other half of it is just intuition and a certain gift for reading what people want. Occasionally--and not too often--I get something come through that is really from the other side, and I make damn sure I get paid well for that because it’s sure as hell exhausting. I’m not saying I can’t communicate with the dead, I’m just saying I’m not that good at it. However, I may know of a group that can give you a hand. Here--”

And she handed him a small card with a phone number, and told him that she didn’t give it to him, if she took his meaning. He had departed fifteen minutes later, with a handful of badly-printed pamphlets on chiromancy, stichomancy, the Tarot, and the practicalities behind holding an effective séance, and promised himself he would peruse them later over a stiff drink.

He went home, waited an hour, dialed the number, got no response, and then sat down to read his pamphlets. It was the sort of silly rubbish he had been used to when he was working as a secret confederate for the mediums at the Spiritualist camp. It had been his job, then, to hide, dressed completely in black, in a hidden passage, and emerge at a certain point, to touch the sitters, move the items on the table, lift the trumpet and speak gibberish into it, and generally play the vaunted role of Death come back to life. He had enjoyed it, but he knew, for all the fakery to which he was exposed, there was a real, deadly presence that the mediums could summon, at times, although it invariably wouldn’t answer at their command.

Well, it would answer to his summons, he decided.

It had been another hour, and the sun was dipping low behind the trees in the backyard, when he went to the phone, picked it up, dialed, and was surprised, suddenly, to hear a voice at the other end say, “Hello?”

It sounded to be an older man, with a thin, wheedling voice, and for almost half a minute, the Doctor fumbled for a way to begin. He then said, “I was given this number by a mutual friend. She said that you are the sort of gentleman that could help me with a problem, a very particular problem... You see, a young lady of my acquaintance has, quite suddenly and inappropriately, passed on. I am told you are a man who is adept at certain practices that might be able to bring a lost loved one...back in

communication...”

He didn't know how to phrase his request, and he wasn't even sure, exactly, what they were talking about. If this was simply another Spiritualist crank, another faker, he felt damn sure he would go over to Madame Zemindar's one evening and beat her within an inch of her miserable little life. Just then, the voice said, "There's no need to go any further. We were expecting you, Tanzler. Yes, your name is already known to us. Tell me: Do you have possession of that vessel that you wish to be filled again?"

"Yes, indeed I do."

"Then you are breaking the law. We realize that the law doesn't always understand the workings of the world of Spirit, and that we must be cunning, at times, and operate outside the conventions imposed upon us by the ignorant and profane. We are fellow travelers in that respect. Come, tonight, and you will see, with your own eyes, the dead walk and speak, and love again."

"This isn't...some sort of illusionist show, is it?"

The man began to laugh, a sound that was, literally, as grating as fingers scraping across a blackboard. He said, "God forbid, Sir! You insult us. We are the true mediums....Necromancers. Do you know what that term implies?"

"I know what it means to some, not to you...I'll be there. What's the address? Bring an offering? Alright. What sort of car do I drive?"

The questions continued for a short time, and then he hung up, without a goodbye. It didn't seem appropriate when ending a conversation with a man who promised that there was no reason to ever say goodbye, again.

The hours seemed to crawl by, and he could feel his sense of worry grow. He had swallowed a morphine caplet, but it had done him little good. Outside, he could see the sun begin to dip beneath the trees.

He went to his personal safe, hidden behind a picture of an old whaling schooner in his study, and took out a few hundred dollars in gold coins. The rest he tied up back in the burlap sack in which he kept them, and closed the lid of the safe again, twirling the combination lock and replacing the portrait of the schooner. One day, when he had enough, he would take Rose with him across the ocean, find an island, and settle down as king of his own domain.

But that was for many years from now. Until then, he would try every avenue he could think of to restore that spark of life that had so unjustly been torn from her breast. And, tonight, he would begin his investigation of the twilight world of resurrection in a new, and active way. He prepared to

leave, went to the garage, opened the door, got in his car, and sped away, making sure to get out and close the garage door tightly first. He had, all things considered, a morbid fear of the possibility of intruders.

He had been given directions to a remarkable two-story pink house, or incalculable age, that rested atop a hill on the outskirts of town. It was, by the look of it, a private residence for a person of some means, and outside, along the road, he noticed there were a number of cars parked, continuing up the drive. Immediately he didn't like this; he knew that such an assortment of vehicles was a dead giveaway to cops.

But he parked, and struggled up the walk, his heart hammering a little faster as he stepped up onto the porch. Everything was fresh and tidy, if old, and he placed his hand on the brass knocker, giving it a resounding slap against the door once or twice. Suddenly, the curtain behind the fanlight opened, and a small portion of a face peeped out. The door swung open slightly, and an older woman cleared her throat and asked him, "Are you Doctor Tanzler?"

"Indeed I am, M'am," he said. "Madame Zemindar sent me. May I come in?"

The woman stalled for a moment, looked him over, and then said, "Why, of course, enter freely of your own will, and leave some of the happiness you bring."

It was the strangest greeting he had ever heard, but he walked in, noting at once the heavy musk of incense and flowers that seemed to waft in from rooms beyond. They were in a sort of foyer, next to a staircase. Upstairs, he gathered, would be the ritual chamber. The house was heavy in shadow, with the exception of a few random beams of sunshine that seemed to break through the chinks in the black curtains.

She led him to a sort of lounge down the hall, and he walked in, all eyes turning upward as he went in slowly. It looked like a surreal variation of his own waiting room. A great fat woman in a bad dress sat, glumly, in a plush red chair, overlooked by an imitation Greek statue. There were a few random men, some standing in a group smoking, who turned to evaluate him, talking amongst themselves. They were well-dressed, but looked like hoods to him. One of them was carrying a briefcase.

He sat down in a wooden chair, was soon joined by one of the men carrying a briefcase.

He said, with false politeness, "Say, pal, you look like the sort of guy that might be interested in buying some pictures."

“I don’t really think so.”

He opened his briefcase anyway, took out a manila folder, and said “Here, take a look anyhow.”

Tanzler took the folder and opened it up. Inside, there were a number of large photos of a young woman in various states of undress. In one of them, she was being forced to copulate with a large canine. Her eyes were dim, drugged hollow pits, and, obviously, behind the dope she was disgusted and terrified of whoever was there forcing her to pose.

He handed the envelope back, his stomach churning, and said “No thank you.”

“You sure, pal? I got even better ones. Ones that make these look tame. Stuff from the old white slavery rackets.”

“I am not,” he began slowly, “interested in pornography. Thank you.”

Tanzler shot him a look as if to say, “keep pushing me, and there will be a scene.”

“Suit yourself, pal.” Said the hood, putting his pictures away and joining his comrades again. Soon, he could hear what sounded to be a low murmur of chanting coming in from upstairs.

The woman who had greeted him came in in a moment and, putting her hands together said, in a very congenial, almost sweet voice, “We’re ready to begin now. If everyone will line up by the door, we will go upstairs for the ritual.”

They did as they were told, and, suddenly, to the nervous chatter of a few people, a hooded character in a long dark robe and black gloves appeared, carrying a number of black candles. He handed them, personally, to each person, and used his own to light them. They were each instructed to hold them in their left hands, and, as the lights were extinguished downstairs, and the heavy musk of scented smoke began to waft , in a thick cloud downstairs, the little woman in black led the procession up the staircase, and through the library, into the ceremonial chamber.

Beyond was a darkened room, lit only by the omnipresent black candles, and heavy with pungent, reeking incense. Flowers were strategically arranged to cover the heavy smell that he knew was the smell of death, the rotting body resting on a table at the far end of the room that seemed to serve as the altar. It was presently covered with a white sheet. On either side a black candle burned, and on a small table at the side a sword and a silver chalice rested beside a book. There were a number of robed, hooded worshipers already present in the room, still chanting solemnly in a strange language that he at first took to be Latin, but then realized was mixture of

that and another tongue, that was unfamiliar to him. The rest of them took their places in a semi-circle around the room, still holding their dripping candles.

The man he had spoken to on the phone (or at least that's who he guessed it was) suddenly emerged from a side door, and the revelers increased their chanting as the High priest took the podium in front of the altar, picked up the sword, and, raising it above his head, proclaimed "In the name of Satan and Lucifer, I command the infernal forces from beyond to come forth and do my bidding!"

"Hail *Shaitan*! Hail Lucifer! Hail the Morning Star!"

Suddenly, one of the hooded men stepped forward and whisked the sheet away from the altar, as the High Priest (whom he was later to learn was an immigrant from the East, although the man had no discernible accent) turned and, lifting his sword, intoned, "We, the walkers of the primrose path between heaven and hell, command the dark forces to move amongst us! To reanimate this body, so that we may communicate with our fallen comrade, walker of the path of darkness and thrice-blessed sister witch, whose fair head is bowed at the feet of the Great Beast, to do his bidding forevermore!"

"Hail Lucifer! Hail Azrael! Hail Betty!"

This was intoned, solemnly, four times, as the High Priest turned to the cardinal directions on the compass, commanding forth dark forces that he, himself, must scarcely understand. The room seemed to grow perceptibly colder, darker. Tanzler could feel his pulse begin to quicken.

Anyone could see that the body on the altar was dead; of that there could be no possible doubt. It was rotted to the point where it seemed positively skeletal, and the smell was really wretched, masked only partly by the flowers and incense. Above it, a perfect pentagram outlined with Hebrew letters and fitted in the center with the literal skull of a goat watched over the devilish ceremony with black, staring eye sockets, drinking in the shadow that seemed to grip the room in a real, palpable sense.

The corpse on the table was that of a middle-aged woman. Just looking at her, nude, decomposed, exposed before the eyes of these mad, profane souls, left him feeling doubtful if this was what he wanted to have performed on his beloved Rose. But what if it really worked? What if these blasphemous fools really could restore life, or, at least a strange shadow of it, to the dead? It would be worth his time at least staying and seeing where this mad charade ended up.

Soon, the revelers had reached an orgiastic state of chanting and ecstasy, and had stripped off their robes to reveal the nude bodies of a fairly

attractive group of young men and women. The people he had come up with from the lounge below were suddenly agog at the spectacle of an orgy commencing on the floor in front of them.

The hoods, he noticed, were tickled with the imminent thought of pleasure. One of them whispered, "What a scene! Man, I sure hope these dames let us join in on the festivities!"

The High Priest turned, and, waving his sword across the altar, commanded, "Awake! Arise, move and appear! I command you, in the name of Hecate and Baal, Asmodeus and Kutu, arise! Arise! Arise!"

"Arise", moaned the maddened throng.

He began to beat his fist upon the altar, keeping time with their chanting, as somewhere in the darkness a hidden confederate intoned a gong. Suddenly, from below, Tanzler heard footsteps rushing up the stairs.

The door swung open, it was the old woman.

"Get this mess cleaned up now! The coppers have just pulled up! We're being raided!"

And that, thought Tanzler abysmally, was just about all he needed.

There was a pounding at the door, and then the thing was kicked in.

"Police! We've got the place surrounded!"

Suddenly, there were feet pounding up the stairs. Tanzler turned, saw the High Priest bound forward into the darkness, and followed him. It was a sliding panel, hidden to look like a part of the wall, and Tanzler forced his own bulk inside, while the High Priest attempted to shut the door on him. He tried to clasp the man in his fingers, but he missed him by inches. He squinted in the darkness, hearing the muffled sounds of the cops duking it out with the toughs in the chamber outside.

He moved forward, finally took the High Priest in hand, shook him, and said, "You got me into this. You're going to get me out of it, understand?"

The High Priest, a little man, trembled like a child in his grasp, and his hood fell back, revealing a badly scarred visage. He said, "Okay, okay. Just let me go, will ya? Follow me, this passage leads to an underground tunnel."

"Okay, but try anything funny, and I swear to God I'll kill you. Got that?"

Tanzler put his hands around the man's throat and began to squeeze. The little man pulled futilely at Tanzler's fingers, exclaimed, "Yes, you fool! I understand! Now, let me go and I'll lead us to safety!"

He followed then, down the hidden passage, to a rickety staircase that led, he was assured, to a sub-basement. He followed, his hand protecting the

guttering flame, and made sure to keep his eyes steadily on the back of the High Priest, whom he went quickly, as if he had practiced this particular escape before.

Finally, the long, unsafe-looking wooden staircase led to a metal door, and the high priest quickly unlocked it and went in. Then, it was down a flight of dust-choked stone steps, into a vacant room filled with the rotting remains of old caskets, piles of funeral ceremonies, old markers, monuments, and the choking dust blown cobwebs that seemed to hang upon everything.

“This place”, explained the High priest, “was once a funeral parlor. It was down here where they use to do the embalming. Look, this was the slab where they cut open the stiff. Here is the blood well...”

He pointed in the darkness, but Tanzler was only now interested in escape.

“Listen you death-worshipping little miscreant, you promised me a way out of here.”

“So I did, but I took you for a man of great intellectual curiosity. I’m sorry I was mistaken.”

He led him across the room, to a place where the bricks of the masonry had been pulled loose and piled around each other. Behind them, a sort of natural tunnel led into the darkness beyond.

“My suspicion is that they used this for the purposes of grave robbing. A ghastly practice. We don’t rely on grave robbing for our rituals. Our dead offer themselves freely to us, for the purposes of re-imbuing them with a soul.”

Tanzler found himself reluctant to enter the tunnel. He was panicked in small, enclosing spaces, and he wondered if he could keep his wits about him, or trust this miserable little jerk to get him out again, alive, to safety. Right now, all he wanted to do was lay in bed next to Rose, to hold her cold flesh and dream of happier days.

“Is it safe?”

“Depends on how you define ‘safe’. It’s safe enough for our purposes. Of course, if you’d rather take your chances back upstairs...”

“No, no. You go first.”

“I had intended to. Put your candle out. From here on out, we crawl straight to freedom. C’mon.”

And, with that, he got behind the man in the tunnel, and began to crawl.

Part 6

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee... --Edgar Allen Poe

It was a frightening experience for him, and it took every ounce of effort he had just to maintain his composure as they crawled across the filthy earth in total darkness. The High Priest, who had initially seemed rather talkative, became more quiet and somber the farther in they got, and this made Tanzler nervous, too, as any human voice was now appreciated as a stabilizing reminder of life while he crawled under the ground like a worm.

He was a man of iron will though, if nothing else, and he maintained his sanity even in the midst of morbid fantasies of being lost forever, or buried alive in a cave-in.

“It’s just a bit further now.”

“You said that awhile ago. How do you know we aren’t going around in circles or something?”

“Because this tunnel goes straight in one direction only: to the Mausoleum in the old cemetery by the bridge. We should be there in two shakes now, if only we hurry.”

And he hadn’t been lying, either. It was only a short time later that they found themselves at a dead end, and looking upward, he spied what appeared to be a grate of some sort. Finally, Tanzler could smell the regenerating waft of fresh air fill his nostrils, and he flicked his lighter as the High Priest pressed outward against the rusted barrier above.

It gave with a yielding creak, and he pushed it aside easily, the rusted metal scraping against the stone floor above. Filthy, both men finally crawled to freedom, in the midst of a large stone room that looked like it had not been entered in many years. There were a row of what looked to be furnace doors to one side, and the High Priest said, “This was the old crematorium. It hasn’t been used in decades. We’ll be alright here, for a little while. We’re safe now: it’s night, and no one comes down here, ever, for any reason. Locals believe it to be haunted.”

“Is it?”

“Let’s just say that there is truth behind every old legend. Now, who do you think it was that tipped off the coppers to our ritual working?”

“I haven’t the foggiest...Hey, you’re not accusing me, are you?”

“Not bloody likely, considering you just crawled through hell behind me

to get away. At any rate, we will regroup and move on, now, as soon as I manage to free my associates. If I can free them.”

“What would be the charge, anyway?”

“In this town, the only crime is believing something different from your neighbor. Apparently, we violated every more that they could conceive of, and now we are paying the penalty. They’ll think of something to pin on us. But it won’t matter. As soon as I can arrange for the bail, we’ll be long gone.”

He sat down heavily upon the stone floor, and Tanzler, to his surprise, found himself doing the same. He felt more congenial now; he had hidden the car, and it looked as if he might get out of this little scrape with his reputation and legal record relatively intact. He could afford to be a bit more relaxed in his dealings with this strange character.

“Sir, if you don’t mind me asking, what did you come looking for tonight? At the ritual? Did you come looking for the secrets that lie behind life and death? Are you interested in witchcraft and the Old Religion, in the dark worship of *Shaitan*, in the cycle of life and death and rebirth?”

Tanzler was glad to see he still had his stump of candle. He lit it, and brought a small circle of light to bear upon the conversation. As exhausted as he was, he was also fascinated by this strange little character.

“Who are you people? Where do you come from? And, would what I saw tonight really have...really have brought that body back to life?”

Tanzler noted, all of a sudden, that his companion was very young. Perhaps mid-twenties. Beyond the scar that covered half of one cheek, he had the look of a wizened street kid. He said, “I’m from gypsy stock. Our people hail from the Old Country. We’ve been chased out of village and town for as long as we can remember. If you think I’m gonna let the yokels of Marion, Indiana get the best of me, you’ve got another thing coming. I worship in the old way, the ancient gods and deities that the Christian world turned into demons when they took control. I don’t care what you call it, but it is the primal, basic force of nature. Neither good, nor evil, but both. Abraxas: darkness and light. I have, of course, adapted my magic in accordance with the dictates of my own indomitable will. What you saw tonight is not Gypsy magic, it is my own working I devised with the help of my guardian spirits.”

He paused for a moment, and then said, “I see that you’re a man of indomitable will yourself.”

“That I am, lad, and I want to apologize for the way I acted back there, but I cannot afford to have any legal entanglements. I am...a very prominent

man in this town.”

“I know who you are, Tanzler. Everyone does, except for maybe those Chicago thugs that came up to get a peep at the girls. We had to let them come: they found out about us and wanted ‘a piece of the action’. What action we had that so appealed to them, I’m not entirely sure about, but they contacted us, and we were too afraid to deny them. It seemed harmless, but it might have been their presence in town that tipped off the police, come to think of it.”

“The criminal world has its own set of superstitions and strange beliefs...Maybe they thought you had some power that could protect them. At any rate, I want to apologize, again. You seem, *different* now, then when I first saw you. A little less suspicious and threatening.”

“It really is okay, Dr. Tanzler. I would have acted exactly the same, if I were in your shoes. Self-preservation is the highest law, in my own personal philosophy. But, you still haven’t explained how you came to be with us tonight.”

“I...” he didn’t know where to begin, or how much to tell this weird kid in the dirty black robe. He finally decided that there was not much more that could pass between them that was not, in some way, incriminating, so he said, “I have, or rather, had a lover...she died. Now, I want her back. I want her to return to me. I want to speak with her again, to know her tender kisses, to hear her sing and laugh again...The medium Zemindar told me how to get in touch with you, although she never specifically told me why.”

At the mention of Madame Zemindar, the High Priest reared back his head and actually laughed, his voice echoing off the vacant walls of the crematory chamber.

“That old witch! Why, her powers have been waning for years! No wonder she sent you to us. She did good, in that respect. I can help you with your problem. In answer to your query: Yes, the body would have lived again, in a manner of speaking. Had we, of course, not been so rudely interrupted.”

“Then it is true, a necromancer can awaken the dead, bring them back?”

“In a sense, yes. However, remember this: death changes everyone. Death is not simply the end of physical embodiment, it is the begging of an entirely new incarnation. No one has ever lived that was not reborn at some level, in that other world. And, also, sometimes the spirit that occupies a body...well, let’s just say, just because a soul re-enters a physical form to live again, does not mean that soul should live again, or deserves to. Or will be the same sort of spirit that left when the heart stopped beating and the

body turned blue. Some might be reborn as *nosferatu*, as vampires by your own standards...”

“This is all a lot to digest.”

“I know, but you came to us for help, did you not?”

“I suppose I did at that. Tell me: How can I go about effecting this transformation, and bring my girl back to life again? Can I perform the ritual, and bring the dead back from beyond?”

“Anyone can do anything, with a little patience and a lot of hard work. Tell me: Can you suspend your rational faculties for a short period of time, enter into an altered state of consciousness, and really believe that you can, and do indeed, perform miracles?”

“I can do anything I can set my mind to, if that’s what you mean.”

“Not entirely, but it is a good attitude to have. No, what I meant was, was that if you want to effect this transformation, if you really want your girl to live and be again, then you must, yourself, stop believing in death.”

“How?”

“By being reborn to death. By surrounding yourself with death; by immersing yourself in the fantasy of death and rebirth. That’s the key to the magic, you see: fantasy. You must make her live again, in your mind and heart, and call forth the forces of death to return her, again, from the shores of that great ocean of beyond. Can you make her live again, even for a few moments? There must be no doubt in your mind.”

He thought for a moment. For the first time, he realized how incurably cold it was in here, and he wondered what time it was. It must, certainly, be well past midnight.

“Yes, I can do all of those things that you ask. What else?”

“Precious little left, except some formalities that I will explain to you in a moment. First, let me tell you, what you propose to do is dangerous. Be careful what you wish for, Tanzler. I can tell you that the spirits themselves have marked you out for something special, unique, but that doesn’t always translate into something, necessarily, *good*. Do you understand me?”

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence, then Tanzler said, “I’ll take my chances.”

“Good. That’s all you needed to acknowledge. Now, when we leave here, we shall part ways, and never see each other or speak with each other again. Never attempt to contact me, for if you do I will never acknowledge ever having met you. Understand? Good. When you leave here, at approximately daybreak, you must take with you something, some memento from this graveyard. For instance, the dust from a baby’s grave would be

excellent. You may need many such things to accentuate the cone of energy you will need for this undertaking...”

And the High Priest had not been lying: it was all very simple. Deceptively simple, as he was about to find out.

It was daybreak before he made his way out of the mausoleum , and down the winding hill into the graveyard. By that time, the high priest had already left, having stripped himself of his ceremonial hooded robe and revealed the regular slacks and shirt he had been wearing all the time underneath. He had instructed Tanzler to wait there for another hour, alone, and that that would give him enough time to get gone. Presumably, he would go back to the empty house, claim what he could and proceed from there. Whatever he did, though, it was none of Tanzler’s business, he knew, and his only concern at this point was getting home and getting back to Rose.

He emerged into the daylight, looking like some foul revenant arisen from the grave, for his clothing was filthy and torn, and his general pallor looked like death warmed over. He would have to walk back to his car (not an inconsiderable distance) and, if anyone saw him in this state, tongues would wag. They would probably say he had been out having himself a snoot full, and let it go at that. *Oh well*, he thought, *let the bastards talk. As long as they never find out any of my real secrets, I’ll continue to do just fine.*

Along the way, he walked through the baby graves, stopping at a fresh one with a little metal marker. It was listed as “Unknown. August 12, 1933”. he stooped, picked up a little dirt from the freshly filled hole, wrapped it carefully in his handkerchief, and put it in his pocket, along with his souvenir stub of black candle. All in all, it was shaping up to be a remarkable day, and he was excited.

It was also damn warm that day. Unnaturally warm.

He made it back to the car, started up the engine, sped past the house he had managed to escape from late last night, made it home, realized he was famished, and went immediately into the kitchen to gorge. Thankfully, it was Sunday, and Mrs. Cove wouldn’t be over. He had the whole day to himself, to plot and plan, and spend with Rose.

As he cooked a portion of cold steak, he listened to some intent buzzing that seemed to be coming from upstairs. Damn smell was strong, too. It was

all this damnable warm weather they were having. Well, he thought, it was high time that he installed some sort of refrigeration system up there. He could tell folks he had asthma, or whatnot, and needed the cool air to keep him from having an attack. Maybe he would start complaining of hay fever.

He wolfed down his food, and then settled back to have a smoke before cleaning up. He felt, surprisingly, sure of himself; he knew he hadn't been seen by any police, and his presence at the cult headquarters would never be traced. All the same, he would keep a careful eye on the papers as the story broke. If anyone tried to implicate him (which he thought unlikely, all things considered) he would handle it. It would simply be his word against their's.

Of course, they would be charged with "corrupting the morals of a minor" or some sort of petty criminal allegation. A good lawyer would get them off fairly easily, if they weren't killed in the county jail, first. But, it was out of his hands, and off of his back now, at any rate.

Still, he couldn't help but shake the feeling that, tonight, he had spoken with a most remarkable young man. Most remarkable. And he found himself regretting his earlier brusque threats and physical violence toward the boy. It had been such a moment of panic, however...

He put it behind him, went upstairs, stripped off his clothing, and ran his body under the water until it was free of dirt (he had a horror of using soap, and would only tolerate it when absolutely necessary), and then proceeded down the hall, naked, to his bedroom. Before he opened the door, he already had a sense of the overpoweringly nauseating scent he was about to endure. He swung the door open, but even he was not prepared for the stench, for the swarm of flies that seemed to blanket the body of Rose, for the overpowering odor of death that seemed to permeate every corner of his bedroom. He ran to the window, opened it, and then wondered if that might not, under the circumstances, have been the wisest thing to do, as it would almost certainly draw more flies, and the stench would waft out up and down the street for all to know. He went over to the side of the bed, and saw that the cover was moving.

Feeling his stomach rise, he gingerly pulled back the sheets.

He ran, feeling himself sickened for the first time since he had brought the body home. He vomited copiously in the toilet, before finding the strength to go back into his room, and do some badly-needed pest control.

The bed clothes were crawling with maggots.

It had taken forever to drive away the vermin, but he had managed to kill the pests, cleanse the room of flies, wash his bedding, and hope like hell his

mattress did not become infested, although he knew the chances it was were probably good. He had moved Rose into the back hallway, gingerly picking up the wasted form with tears in his eyes, and placing her in his workshop, beneath a sheet. It had taken exhausting hours, but, strangely, he had not become tired again, although sleep now seemed like a distant memory.

He worked diligently, building their love nest again from scratch, until the room, deceptively, seemed as sane a model of blandness as it had before this entire episode had started. He knew that there might soon be a colony of maggots burrowing deep into Rose, feasting off of her decaying flesh, and he meant to forestall any more decay as long as possible. But how to do it?

He knew, instinctively, that it should be ritualized, and the High Priest had told him as much. He wondered what materials could be used to simulate skin, to add luster again to the eyes, to recreate a devastated human form from the bottom upward. He would need make-ups, possibly some wax...It was something that adhered solidly to the skin, and he had always loved the cool easy feeling of touching wax when it had dried on the surface of his finger. It had a liquid warmth, a sort of burning itch while it cooled upon flesh. But, how to keep the female form?

He would figure it out, in time. He was, after all, a very diligent, determined man.

He had visited a craft supply store which he was known to frequent, had walked out with what seemed a massive block of candle wax. He could melt it piece by piece, easily, and then use strips of his own silk bedding to restore the face to its former luster. He had put in a supply of ladies make-ups, and he had a number of photographs of Rose to guide him in his endeavor.

And, what's more, he had the information that the High priest had given him, and he was sure that that was enough.

He went home that day elated, making certain that he could operate undisturbed for the next few hours. In his bed, Rose lay in somnolent repose, her decay an assured phenomenon of nature. Her face had already begun to resemble little more than that of a skeletal wretch; her skin had taken a malodorous green pallor. The stench in his bedroom, he knew, was something not many people would relish, but it no longer disturbed him.

He realized that he would have to move her back into the workshop if he was to avoid making a mess, and he gently picked up the crumbling

skeleton, resolving that the bones should be easy enough to piece back together with piano wire. After all, he was a craftsman of the first water, if nothing else...

He bent over her form, laid out on an old board placed between two sawhorses, delicately dipping the ripped pieces of his own silk sheets in melted wax, covering his own fingers in the stuff, and placing the hot, wet strips on the angular cheekbone of her shriveled face. There was whiteness again, a colored strip of it, blotting out the rot of her features, restoring an artificial semblance of life to the cadaver. It was grim work he knew, but the more he did it, the more he became entranced by the transformation he was effecting. It was as if he was pioneering an entirely new art form, one beyond the rudiments of the embalmer and mortician. He was not simply restoring beauty of an image, he was restoring life itself. His hot, dripping fingers were awakening some intangible beauty that was beyond death and decay of the body. Soon, after the wax dried (and, his greatest problem had been smoothing it into shape), he would apply the necessary makeup to bring out a fuller beauty. In time, even though the hair seemed to have maintained very well, he knew he might have to purchase a wig. It was a little matter to him, as his fingers went lovingly over his work, as an artist might sculpt beauty from the raw clay of the earth, so he would sculpt it from the rotten carcass of desiccation. In this, he stared into the true soul of poetry and art.

It was not, especially, that he wanted to kill. The entire idea seemed to him insane, even monstrous. However, as much as he knew he would be putting himself in personal, permanent danger because of the act, he also knew it was the only way to satiate the never-ending appetite of Rose. His own blood, fresh from his veins, was no longer enough; it reproduced an imitation of life, allowed some movement of the body, but it wore thin quickly, and she grew hungry for more.

Something copious with blood. Something as fresh as he could possibly manage, and something whose entire body could be consumed, could be used as the raw material of her eventual rebirth. It was coming, he felt, deep within himself; the irony of it was, was that it might only take a few, one or two victims, before she could be restored to him. He could remove the skin, catch the torrent of blood in an old pail, save the flesh stock of the meat and internal organs and pound them to a pulpy stew for her. He could let her consume, but it would be at a shattering loss to himself.

She lay upon the bed, in a semi-conscious state, the telepathic

communications growing more and more feeble. A transfusion of his own blood into her did little, now, to ease the torment of her suffering, to pry her life free from the deep, liquid cement that was the slow, gradual slide back into the world of the dead.

“How are you , my dear?”

I am weak, today, lover. Can't we have a little something to pick us up?

“I don't know if I can do what you ask of me. I've...I've never done such a thing in my entire life.”

If you don't, I'll slip away, and there will be no coming back again, this time. They won't allow me to slip their reigns again. I'll be trapped knowing that I could have had...another chance.

“If I do this, and they discover me, I'll buy myself a ride on the electric chair. Then, we will both be dead.”

And we'll be together. Did not you once say that you would do anything you could for me? Either way, we will join each other. Better in this world, where the pleasures of life, and love, and the flesh are so much sweeter than in that disembodied state, that world of shadows.

“But, does one stay in that world? It's what I'd like to know. What could be the end of just a half-conscious, disembodied existence? Surely, there must be something in death beyond that.”

How should I know? Am I God? I didn't make up the rules, lover, I just abide by them. Oh, I am getting weaker by the minute. I need more, much more, to bring me back. To make me whole. To live.

“You're right of course,” he said, climbing into bed next to her , and taking the bony, waxen, trembling hand in his own. The pulse of life was getting weak, again; the flesh felt as if it were receding back to wax.

“I'm being difficult, aren't I love? I'm thinking with the old brain, and the old brain was hindered, strapped in by constrictions; unable to see a vista of new possibilities, unable of looking at the world as a conqueror, as a man whose will is paramount and king of this domain. Your very existence at this point is a leap of faith, a look into the abyss, isn't it?”

I'm glad to see your tongue is as glib as ever. You might win a lady's heart some day. Now, do as I ask, and we can be together again. Forever.

“Anything. Anything for you, my love.”

Yes, my love, and you've already done the hard part. The rest is about as serious as squashing a fly. I think you have someone in mind already-

“I-I can't...she'll be missed.”

She'll be missed, but she won't be mourned. The world would be better off without her. Her disposition is as sour as the smell of her sweat, and you

can always deny having any idea what's become of her. There will be precious little evidence, and I'll take care of the rest. Lover, can you see the pain in my eyes, as we speak?

And to his amazement, for a twinkling of a second, her dead pits opened, and he could see the tortured look of a hungry animal peering out from behind waxen lids. New eyes had developed, haunted eyes that needed meat and drink, and love. Only he could restore her, and give her these things anew.

"When should I do it?"

You'll have to decide that. You are the one with two arms and two legs and the ability to walk about and make up your own mind based on the circumstances at hand. But it must be done soon, and I must have all of her blood. All of it, and much of her flesh. It should only take one, two, at the most three sacrifices to cure me, to restore me as an actual, living breathing woman again. Won't that be wonderful?

He wondered, not for the first time, if she would truly be the same as she had been before. As if in answer to this she suddenly said, *I won't lie to you. Hell changes you, and the world of living men will always seem to me too bright, too much a fairy fable, compared with the dread melancholy and the shadow sensations that mark out this dismal place between. I am neither dead nor alive, but both. It is like having one foot in Hell, and the other in paradise. When I am returned to my former state, I will be overjoyed to feel, and touch, and think, and love once again. But a part of me will always know Hell. And Hell changes you.*

Her words rang in his ears, and he left the room, suddenly, to pace the darkened halls, and to think. It was while sitting at his workbench, staring at half-a-dozen disused electrical toys that he hadn't bothered touching in months, that he finally decided what was for the best.

"I'll do it," he said, as much to himself as to the emptiness of a small, dark room. He considered.

Was he speaking out loud for God?

It was the next day, and Mrs. Cove came into work, same as always, carrying her huge handbag, and sitting down at her desk as if nothing in the world was the matter. She was damned if she was going to walk out and let a good job just fall by the wayside; Tanzler was still paying her, whether he was seeing patients himself, or not. Mostly, she expected him to stay upstairs brooding, as he always did anymore, brooding over his smelly chemicals and working his mad "experiments".

“Sonofabitch might blow us both to kingdom come, today,” she reflected, a little tensely. “I guess that’s the price you pay.” She would goldbrick down here, in the foyer, let him alone with his madness, and read magazine articles until it was time to leave. Maybe, eventually, he would get over his present eccentric bout, and return to normal. Until he did, she intended to continue being paid.

She plopped a jawbreaker into her mouth, began clacking it against her teeth, and he walked about nervously upstairs, his excitement and fear mingling into a red-hot fervor. He had considered half-a-dozen ways he might commence with this initial murder: poison, rope, gun, knife, a push down the stairs--all seemed to have their particular drawbacks. How to do it? How to actually go about killing a person? It was a thorny problem. After today, it would cease to be a theoretical one.

He finally decided on a course of action, while standing in his bedroom with his pants slipping down around his ankles. He had been going to change into a fresh suit, but thought better of it now. He let his pants slip down, unbuttoned his shirt, and stood in front of the full-length mirror in only his underwear shirt and boxers. He slipped out of these, and stood completely naked now, except for his socks, and then he reached down and pulled those off, as well. Now he was as bare as the day he was born, a massive, nude man creeping across the threshold in the shadows at the top of the stairs. In a few moments would be the moment of truth. Downstairs, he could hear Mrs. Cove idly flipping the pages of a magazine.

“Mrs. Cove? Mrs. Cove...”

He heard the rattle of pages as she put the magazine down.

He could see her shadow in the foyer below as he crept behind the wall.

“Mrs. Cove...Could you please come up here? I have something I need your assistance with.”

He heard her mumble something under her breath and begin to ascend the stairs. He could feel his heart beat in the shadows, and he began to step backward, into the relative gloom of the empty upstairs guest room. Here, the sunlight was filtered through filmy shades, dust swirling in little eddies and moats in the shafts of light. It was naturally dark in here, for some reason; the empty guest room, with its wide dusty, brown wooden floor and its bare walls seemed to drink in light and keep it digesting in some dark, secret intestine all its own. He waited until he could hear her tiptoeing to the top of the stairs, called out, “In here, Mrs. Cove.”

Her first impression of him, as she drank in the fullness of his form standing before her, was that he had finally decided that he must make love

with her. She said, "Oh, Doctor, why didn't you ever say anything before?" She walked up to him, sashaying her little plump form, and then lifted her skirts to reveal her hairy, overgrown womanhood for him. He gripped her for a moment, lovingly, kneading the fat flesh between his fingers, before slowly bringing up the surgical scalpel, and cutting her throat from ear to ear...

He hadn't mean to act so impulsively, but the touch and stench of her invigorated something maddeningly homicidal in him, and as she recoiled, gurgling on her own blood, backing away, with her hands to her throat and her eyes twin moons of agony, he struck out with the scalpel in panic, raising it, again and again, and plunging it into her bleeding breast until at last she crumpled at the top of the stairs, rolled backward, cracked her spine and broke her neck tumbling end to end. She was dead in a pool of her own blood before she hit the bottom.

Finally, as he stood at the top of the stairs looking at her, he understood exactly why this particular act carried such an incredible roar of sensation and power. He felt her last scream in his ears, smelled the cloying stench of her acrid body odor on his nostrils, as the image of her faded and the reality of his new task took firm root in his brain. If he didn't hurry, she would drain her precious fluid on his floors, along with her piss, and ruin not only his plans but create a scummy mess that would be near impossible to take up from the floorboards adequately. He hurried down, felt for a pulse, was satisfied that the crumpled, bloodied form of Mrs. Cove now bore no life inside of her, picked her up, and carried her to the disused tub in his workshop, where he placed her body in the gentle curve of the white porcelain that was, even now, steadily turning red.

He grabbed rags and a bucket of water, careful to wipe himself first, and hurried downstairs, frantically trying to eliminate as much of the sopping, bloody evidence as was possible. It wouldn't simply vanish, he knew, and it might become necessary to put a new, luxuriant carpet in place, to hide the stain of blood that would mark the foot of the stairs, forever. He wondered, for a moment, about the power of such a stain to draw back the spirit from beyond the veil, then put the thought out of his mind. There was no time, at the moment, for worry and concern. Only clear-headed, rational thought would do.

He uttered an oath under his breath, took his handful of rags with him, and took the stairs two at a time, going back into his workshop, and surveying, in the clear light of an amber sunset, the body of Mrs. Cove.

Her mouth was stretched in a rictus of agony, and soon rigor mortis would render the thing incapable of being moved. He grabbed an old tea pot

, a knife, and began to cut the meat off her bones in great, grisly sections, not particularly relishing the work, but treating it in much the same manner as when he had dissected bodies during his failed attempt at medical school. He collected flesh and blood in his teapot, and, hearing the moans of his beloved resound in his mind, suddenly, and knowing that the smell of blood had reawakened in her the strength to communicate, went out the door, up the hall, and into his bedroom, carrying the sanguine slop like it was a healing balm. Which, in this extraordinary case, it was.

Yes, you've done well. I can smell the bitter stench of death upon the air. It smells sweet. It's like the nectar of the gods, now. I want you to bring me that, my love. Yes, lover, please, rub a little blood upon my lips. Do it. Don't be afraid, I won't bite you.

"How do you want this?" he asked, setting the pitcher down upon the nightstand. A rivulet of blood ran down the side, like a wonderful red streak of paint against the white, gleaming surface.

I'll take it by mouth. Put your finger in it, and get it wet. Rub it on my lips, and the dryness will go away. Do it. Ah, yes, that's good. I can taste that. I can taste that. It has been so damn long since I've tasted anything. Again. I'm coming around now. I can feel myself get stronger. My lips are growing full, and moist. Kiss me.

He bent over her, her dead mouth wet with Myra Cove's blood, and thrust his lips onto hers. In a few moments, he had inserted his tongue into the rotting mouth, felt the life begin to bloom there again, as the dry, withered tongue found his own. The blood was a healer, no doubt. And the flesh would bring her a new blossom the likes of which he had not seen since first she died.

He held her, amazed at the minute movements and tremors in her cadaverous form, as the bloody meal worked its healing magic upon the old bones. Flesh seemed to regenerate, bloom outward, and spontaneously heal from rotted putrefaction to a more normal (albeit not altogether normal) semblance of living tissue. She was being reborn in a new and vital form. Now, her lips broke free from their rictus, and she was speaking in a cracked garble that he could barely understand.

"Yes, my love?"

"Wonderful..."

Was all that she said, but he knew. Her body was still wasted, and her legs looked like the legs of a malnourished child, or a burn victim, as did her arms and chest. But he could feel vital skin, and pulsing blood beneath, and as he climbed on top of her, and her arms moved slowly over his back,

he knew the full gamut of unhallowed, miserable lust as he bucked his hips against her rising form.

Afterward, she found that she could move her upper torso slowly. She was still wasted, physically; an unknowing person would, surely, mistake her for a dying cancer patient in the last stages of life, instead of a dead woman in the first stages of a miraculous rebirth. Her voice was still hard, charnel, sounding of the grit of the grave, but she could speak with earthly lips, and move her arms, although she could not rise from her bed.

“Bring...me...the rest of it.”

“Yes, my love.”

And so he did, and at the same time he began making preparations for what to do with the bones and whatever other remains were not used up in this mad resurrection. The clothing he could burn in the fireplace; the skeleton was a problem, but could probably be dissolved with a quantity of carbolic acid. It was perfect all around. He already had his lies to the police ready and rehearsed in his mind, and no one would ever stoop to suspect so honorable, so upstanding a prominent citizen as himself. After all, a doctor saved lives, didn't he?

It sucked the heart and liver and intestines through the lips, and he fought down his revulsion as he fed a bucketful of Mrs. Cove to Rose, who by now was taking on the aura of a real, living individual. Perhaps she looked like a cannibal from some primitive culture, or a surrealist nightmare of a perfectly ordinary girl devouring human brains and intestines, but, at last, she was alive, in a sense; her flesh full and wonderful again, the heavy wax strips, gore, and decayed remains mingling, coalescing, and dissolving into a new reality of Rose that was much the same as he remembered her.

“It is enough...for now. It was almost too much at once.” She spoke, and although her voice was still guttural, still sepulchral, in a sense, there was a tone there that he could identify as her old voice returning.

How much more would she require.

“One more, perhaps two, and it will be finished. I am still...too weak to walk with earthly feet. But I am different now. Hell--”

“Hell changes you. You told me. You still stink of the earth and of death, but I love you all the more.”

“And I love you, my dear. And I thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you have done to rescue me from that never ending night.”

The bedding was a blood-splattered nightmare that would have to be burned. He carefully pulled it out from under her, waded it into a bundle,

and planned to burn it along with the clothing.

Suddenly, Rose looked a little pensive.

“Her soul is still here. Confused. I suspect she doesn’t even realize that she is dead.”

“Will she be a problem for us?”

“Not in the least, although she may walk these corridors and rooms for quite some time to come. I suspect you may get a glimpse of her, now and again, hear a rude utterance, or catch the snivel from her disincorporate lips. I think, all things considered, it’s a trifling matter.”

“I agree. Now, I’ve waited for you to hear this.”

He sat at the Wurlitzer in the corner of the room, suddenly lit a candle, and turned out the electric lights. In truth, he was exhausted, and the excitement generated by this first murder, and the resultant near-complete resurrection of darling Rose, was enough to keep his fingers moving slowly, his head bowed over the keys, while a blissful, sonorous music issued forth.

“It’s lovely. What...do you call it?”

He turned, said, “I call it, ‘Rosabelle, Believe’. I wrote it especially for you, and now, you are back with me, where you belong, and I’ll never let you go again, my love. I am so sorry. I should have married you.”

“Yes, but we aren’t through yet. My legs are still frail, and my waist is icy and full of pain. One more, at the most two, and this will all be over. And then we can really be as one.”

He lay with her, as content as a babe, with the music straining an invisible melody in his ears, for all of the long, dark night.

Part 7

And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride,
In the sepulcher there by the sea,
In her tomb by the sounding sea. -- Edgar Allen Poe

He had driven for hours that night, aware that this final foray into the world of murder and madness would have to be suitably bloody, would have to provide the necessary energy to bring the final work to fruition. It was in a seedy bar at the side of the road that he found his prospect.

He had sauntered in casually, caught an eyeful of an older, shabbier woman sitting at the bar, one of her legs hiked up on the metal pole that ran

the length of the counter. She was maybe forty-five years old, but looked a little older. A few teeth were missing, and the hair had already begun to turn grey. Her figure was good though, if that had been what he had been interested in.

It took a few minutes of idle chit chat to get her alone at a table. She sat down, looking, for all the world, as tired and cynical as one would expect from a middle aged prostitute in a seedy bar outside of a small town. She puffed on her cigarette distractedly, the music from the old Victrola in the corner going a long way to masking anything he was saying. He supposed it wasn't important.

"How much?"

She turned, considered him a moment, and then said, "Twenty five for you. You sure as hell don't look like no working man. I'll make it worth every last dime, sugar."

"I want to go to a motel. Is that okay?"

"You're in the driver's seat. I'm just along for the ride."

"Nice sense of humor you have there. What's your name, again?"

"Norma Jean. Friends all call me Norm."

"Okay, Norm, let's boogie, as the young kids say."

"Is that what they say? Maybe some hoodlums in a negro jazz joint in Harlem...Around here, we're all white people, and we only like country and gospel."

She got up, sashaying a bit for his benefit, lest he lose his nerve, but the effect came off as grotesque. There was no way for her to mask her boredom at the agreement that had just been made. Twenty dollars, however, was still twenty dollars.

He got in, and she slid in beside him, her eyes puffy and sleepy, and said, "There's a place just up the road a piece we can go. I take all my customers there."

"You do this a lot huh?"

"Mister, I do this for a living. I'm what you call a professional in my particular field." She smiled, revealing a row of yellowed teeth, the front one being chipped. He drove till they came to the parking lot of an old motor court. At first, he wasn't even certain that the place was still in business. A neon sign in front was partly burned out. The M in the word "Motel" was gone. The place looked nearly deserted, with only a car and truck out front to even mark that anyone was there.

He parked, got out, followed her inside, and walked up to a large, oafish man that looked as if he had not bathed or shaved in several days. He was

snoozing on the counter, bent over a lurid pulp magazine, when Norm knocked on the wood and said, "Hey, Buford, we'd like a room."

The man snapped awake, his head coming up, and he rubbed his eyes. He said nothing, but with a knowing frown spreading across his unshaven features, he reached back, got the key from the board on the wall, and handing it to her, said, "That will be eight dollars."

"Eight dollars? To stay in this dump?"

"Hey, I know what you guys are up to, and, although it ain't none of my business, it's damned illegal and I could get raided and hauled off to jail for creating a public nuisance. So, you gotta little business you want to transact here, you gotta pay a little extra for the privilege."

Tanzler handed the man his money, and then took the key, walked back out, and went down the walk to the little lodge marked Room 14. He opened the door, disliked the musty, closed-in smell at once, and noted that the room looked like it hadn't been too recently cleaned. No matter. It would suit his purposes nicely.

Norm jumped on the bed, bent over on her hands and knees, and hiked up her skirt. She wasn't wearing any underwear, and didn't smell like a rose, either. He turned, said, "Not so fast. I have something I need to get out of my car. Just a minute."

He strode out the door and out to the parking lot, was pleased to see Rose sitting in the back seat, waiting for him. He opened up the door, helped her out. The plan was coming along perfectly; he already had known, in advance, that this was where they would go. He had come here earlier with Rose, himself in disguise, and had rented an adjacent room.

It had been obvious to him that this particular dive acted as a rendezvous spot for prostitutes and their clients. He was, as always, one step ahead of his prey.

He led Rose from the car, back through the door, where Norm had stripped off her clothing and was laying in bed, her legs slightly parted and a bored expression on her face. At first she looked confused as the long silhouette of Rose first appeared in the door. Then, she said, "Hey, that's going to cost you extra. I don't usually do couples."

Rose lifted her veil, and Norm paled suddenly, shrinking back physically at the waxen, half-dead image as Rose walked toward her with her arms slightly extended, her fingers poised to take the haggard visage of Norm into her hands.

"She's beautiful, Carl. She'll do, wonderfully."

Rose placed her hands on Norm's cheeks, and the woman screamed and

jerked away. The fingers left little white bruises of cold down the side of her face.

“I don’t know what kind of thing you people had in mind, but I’m not up for it. I’ve got to go now.”

She began to hustle back into her clothing, moving away from them to the far wall as she did so. They were both, she realized, standing between her and the exit.

Suddenly, Carl leaped forward, knocking Rose off balance and sending her sprawling to the floor, as he grabbed Norm in his powerful hands. She let out one hideous, shrill scream before he got his hand over her mouth, bending her over and slamming her to the floor. He then pounced on top of her, retrieved the scalpel from his coat pocket, and sliced her throat from ear to ear. Blood pooled out beneath him on the floor, and Rose began to inch forward, her tongue extended, as the body continued to thrash, and finally succumbed, in a fit of gurgling, to an awesome wave of blackness.

She devoured the remains of Norm in an animalistic fashion, lying on the floor with her face buried deeply in the wound. Tanzler was standing in the corner of the room, breathing heavily. He half-expected someone, presumably Buford, to come running at that last scream. Of course, chances were he expected screams, moans, and many strange sounds, considering he knew, ostensibly, what profession Norm was involved in when she checked in.

The blood and grue was thick on the floor, and he realized quickly that he had better, at least, make some sort of effort to clean it up. The remains could be carted out in garbage sacks.

“Rose. Rose...I need to move her.”

Rose lifted her blood-splattered lips and looked at him, a feral look in her entranced eyes. For a moment, he feared that she might attack him in her rage and lust, for she had already grown stronger than she had been since she had been brought back to him. She raised herself, slowly, got to her feet, looked as if the energy pulsing through her veins was sufficient to keep her alive forever, and motioned for him to go ahead and move the cadaver.

He picked up the body of Norm, walked into the bathroom, and dropped the body into the tub. He then told her to take off her clothing, and put on Norm’s cast-about clothing, and to put her veil back on her face.

“Do you feel up to going to the car, and getting my bag?”

“Yes, my love.”

“Can you help scrub up this...mess? Do you feel up to it?”

“Right now,” she said, wiping the blood from her mouth on her wrist, absentmindedly, “I feel capable of almost anything.”

“Good. We need to clean this place up as much as possible, and be gone. Are you quite through with this specimen?”

“I’ve taken all I need. More. I am finally there. There will be no threat of death, anymore.”

She went and retrieved his medical bag, and then went back out to get a laundry sack he had stowed away in the trunk. It was full of cleaning supplies. As she went, he realized, now, how quick and sure her steps were, as compared with before. Her skin had already lost all of its pallor and sickliness, and it seemed that, finally, he would have her back the way that she had been before.

He began, slowly, to dismember the body, now shriveled and somewhat shrunken with the total withdrawal of life and vitality that had occurred. Altogether, he was a happy man just then, nearly whistling while he worked. In the next room, he could hear the sound of cloth scrubbing against the floor.

He had got up from his work momentarily, wiping his sweating brow, and went into the next room, where Rose was fairly dirty in watery blood. He touched her shoulder, excited at the fullness and warmth of it, and had her rise, and look at him. Her mouth was still wet--seeping really--the sanguine fluid that was her healing balm.

“You are so beautiful, right now. Kiss me.”

He drew her close to him, at last feeling the old warmth. The salty, metallic taste of blood filled his mouth, and he let his fingers caress her hair, grown full, and vital, and black as midnight again.

“I love you, Carl.”

“I love you too, Rosabelle. Believe...Believe me. I love you more than life itself.”

“More than death ever could.”

“Death and hell itself could not keep you from me, could it?”

“It was only your passion and dedication that brought me back.”

It was only several moments more before he had undressed her again, and they were lying, in a mad, passionate embrace, on the slick of Norm’s blood that still tainted the floor. He knew that he would have to burn all of their clothing later, but at this point the beast had awakened in him, and her dead flesh was supple and warm to him, and her mouth became a yielding

softness that smelled of blood and life and lust.

And thus it would be, as far as he knew, forever.

Before daybreak that morning he had placed the two large sacks back in the trunk, had driven the car to the door of the motel office, and had left Rose in the car, in full view of the desk and still wearing Norm's cheap, flower-patterned dress.

"Long night, huh pal?"

The sleeping Buford had arisen, wiped his eyes, leered at him, and then taken back the key to the room.

"Yes, it certainly was. Now, I have to get this fine young lady back home. A good day to you, Sir."

Buford looked out the glass door at the car, a few half-hearted fantasies flitting around in his perverted brain, and then settled back into his chair, to wait, presumably, for his replacement.

Tanzler had cleaned and wiped surfaces for hours, making sure that everything was as tidy as possible. The bloodstains, he knew, would be overlooked in a dump like this. He had gotten a good deal of it up, anyway, and whatever remained would be dismissed with a shrug. There was no evidence that a crime had even been committed, and he had left with a woman dressed in exactly the same clothing as the one he had arrived with, hours before. Altogether, it was perfect.

The ride back to his house was like the beginning of a romantic fairy tale--the reunion of two lovers after a long and cruel separation. Now, Rose was complete again; now she was fully a woman. He stopped the car in front of the house, got out, went to the passenger door, opened it, put out his arms, and extolled her to 'climb aboard.'

"You're silly. I can walk on my own now."

"I won't miss the chance to carry you over the threshold."

She sounded a bit more stern.

"I want to walk on my own. I have legs now that will function entirely normally. You can't care for me as if I was an invalid forever."

He acceded to her request, and instead took her hand as he led her, glancing about at the still-sleeping houses, up the walkway and inside.

It was, truly, a homecoming.

He made coffee for himself, his strange bride seated at the table, running her revitalized hands--her new skin--along the cool, slick surface. It was only a short time later, seated with her, smoking, that his fingers and hands

began to tremble as if he was afflicted with a terrific palsy.

“We must have left evidence all over the place. They may come for me yet, you know.”

“I doubt it. I feel as if we are protected. Do you understand what I mean?”

“I ...I believe so. So the magic is protecting us, eh? I hope, for your sake, that that is the case.”

“At any rate,” she said to him, “that is the least of our worries at this point. Every day I get stronger, every day my energy slips further and further from their grasp. But they are still there. And they can still feel me, and slip in, if they can only find a way.”

He looked at her then with new eyes. That she continued to have an awareness of that other world, even though she was, for all intents and purposes, a true, living woman again, was remarkable to him. She obviously knew many things, things she'd dare not tell even him, and many things he dare not ask.

“And how could they accomplish this? What would bring them in, to us? To claim you again?”

“Many things could. A strange wind could carry them across the veil, or an epidemic. Blood calls to them, and they smell it out in the air. We have spilled a lot of blood recently, Carl.”

“We spilled it for you. For us.” he leaned over, grasped her hand, liking the warmth of it, and felt the growing unease within his own bones, too. He knew that they might evade capture for a short while. Eventually though, the dead would return to them, claim them, as surely as snow followed predictably at the change of the seasons from warmth to ice.

It wasn't the police, just then, that troubled him. But he knew, inside his heart, that he had committed an act that God would, surely, look upon as an abomination. Could such selfish heresy ever go unpunished?

He didn't believe so, and he didn't believe that happiness could ever, truly, be his, either. On the contrary, as of now, he felt positively sick with worry and fear.

She got up from table, walked behind him, and began to caress his shoulders. He sighed, knowing full well that he had some more duties to take care of before he retired. There were several sacks full of material that needed to be burned and disposed of, and hopefully, somehow, he could muster the energy to do so.

“Carl, it won't do us a bit of good if we become sick with worry. Come, everything else can wait for now. Let's listen to the Victrola for a few little

while, and forget our troubles, okay?”

He rose, looked deeply into her eyes, and then walked with her, arm in arm, into the living room. It was dim to dark, but he found one of his favorite records, and wound the player, setting the needle on the scratched surface, and suddenly finding himself transported by the music to a new place, where loved reigned supreme over all.

Next door, nosy Mrs. Eastman had heard the faint whine of music being played from Dr. Tanzler’s house, and had crept from bed to get a look out the window. Strange. The lights were on behind the sash, and she could see the doctor moving about the room, as if in a daze. The old bird, she decided, had finally lost it. And what was that he was holding?

It looked, for all the world, like a mannequin.

She peered closer, and then, in a bolt of inspiration, and outright mischievousness, she threw on her robe and tip-toed out the back door, walking along the fence that bordered her property from that of the doctor’s, and looked through the hole up toward the first floor window.

She suddenly froze, not believing her eyes.

She clamped her hand to her mouth and bit down, forcing the scream back into her throat before she ran, trippingly, back inside.

She slammed the door behind her, holding her back to it, her breath coming in great, gasping huffs. She didn’t know if she saw what she thought she saw, but one thing was for certain: When Bob got home tonight, she was going to have a long chat with him about their next door neighbor. He might think she was a hysterical woman.

Then again, hadn’t Bob always said that he thought Tanzler was “a little off”?

That was Bob. Always a gift for understatement.

She made sure the door was locked, pulled down the shades, and thought of the first person she could call to help her ease her nerves.

It was not long before the entire neighborhood was buzzing with rumors about Tanzler. The man had not seen patients in many months, and for all anyone knew he had a fortune in gold stashed somewhere in the house. Enough money to keep him, or so rumor said, for the rest of his natural life.

There was no way to stop the idle chatter about him; he caught wind of one rumor, on a rare trip downtown, while he was getting a shave and shine, and busying himself with the paper.

“You heard about Doctor Tanzler?”, one beefy man asked another while

they both waited on Charles to finish clipping his whiskers. His ears perked up immediately, and the other man said:

“No. What’s the scoop?”

“Word is he’s a German agent. Yeah. Somebody said they caught him singing some Nazi songs in his house one night, drunk as a skunk, and they saw him throwing up that one-armed salute.”

“Ya don’t say? Maybe that explains why he went out of business all of a sudden. The Krauts are paying his bills for him. Makes sense.”

Carl suddenly piped up, “No, it does not.”

He folded his paper brusquely, got up from the chair, paid Charles, and turned, saying, “I take deep offense at any suggestion that besmirches the deep, abiding patriotism I have for this country. Now, if you gentleman will excuse me--”

The two lummoxes began laughing, one of them taking the chewed end of his cigar from his mouth, before putting it back between his stained lips, lighting it, and saying, “What are the odds of that happening? I told you he was some kind of goddamned spy.”

A pounding at the door awoke him, and he threw on his robe, pattering downstairs in his stocking feet. He opened the door a crack, and saw a tall, well-dressed man carrying a briefcase standing on the porch.

“Can I help you,” he asked, somewhat embarrassed to have been so caught off guard as this.

The man smiled, thrust out his hand, and said, “Dr Tanzler? My name is Donald Baumgartner. I’m a private detective.”

Pause.

“Oh?”

“I’ve been hired to help locate Mrs. Imelda Cove. Her daughter seems to think something’s happened to her. Police don’t think so. They say it looks as if she just got tired...needed some time away. Told me you were the man to see about it.”

He stalled for a minute more, suddenly opened the door all the way, and said, “Yes, why of course. Anything I can do to help. Won’t you please come inside?”

With a sweeping motion of his arm, he showed Baumgartner in, telling him it would only take a moment for him to be dressed and make himself look presentable. Baumgartner, for his part, made himself right at home, sitting down on the couch, looking around at the ornate furnishings and giving a little whistle between his teeth.

Tanzler hurried up the stairs, went into his room, told Rose to be as still as possible.

“There’s a policeman downstairs, my dear. You just keep quiet, and I’ll deal with this.”

“I’m still exhausted from last night, anyway. You wake me up later, when he leaves, and we can discuss it.”

She remained lying in bed, her eyes closing softly as she renewed slumber. He threw on a pair of pants, quickly buttoned his shirt, slipped on his shoes, and got his best jacket. A quick comb, and a grab for his pouch of tobacco, and he was back downstairs, smiling and offering the good Mr. Baumgartner a drink.

“Well, I tell ya, I don’t normally drink when I’m working but...have you got scotch?”

Tanzler laughed, said, “I keep a well-stocked liquor cabinet, Mr. Baumgartner. It’s one of my worst vices, I’m sure you’ll agree. You know, I use to be all for Temperance...”

Baumgartner suddenly spoke up, “Use to be? What happened?”

“I lost someone very important to me. Oh, it was a long time ago, but it turned me into a boozier again. I’m afraid I must confess to the weak will of the aged and alone.”

Tanzler went to the liquor cabinet, opened it, pulled out the bottle, and walked into the kitchen to retrieve two glass tumblers. He then returned to the living room, set them down on the coffee table, and began to roll a cigarette for himself.

“Well, I can’t say I’m a bit sorry about that. You’re weakness for drink, I mean. Okay, all I need to do is ask you a few pertinent questions and I think I can be on my way.”

The detective pulled out his notebook and a small stub of pencil. He wrote in the quick, hurried fashion of someone used to a lot of desk work. Tanzler eyed him coolly behind his cloud of smoke.

“So...how long did Imelda Cove work for you, anyway?”

“Oh, maybe five, six years. I never got to know her very well, I’m afraid. She was a very private woman, and not an altogether friendly or charitable person. From my viewpoint, at least.”

“I see. Okay, did she mention anything to you that she might be unhappy with her job, that maybe she was going to go somewhere suddenly, something out of the ordinary?”

“Certainly not. Imelda would not have confided in me, because she knew the sort of individual I am.”

“Really? And what sort is that?”

Baumgartner’s eyes became curious, and his large hand didn’t seem to be writing very much in the way of exact notes.

“Professional,” said Tanzler. “I am a consummate professional, and inclined not to be interested, much, in the personal affairs of those that I employ. My reputation in this town is beyond reproach, and I can’t afford to see it sullied. Similarly, I cannot afford to let the affairs of this office go neglected simply because I have an overabundance of pity or personal interest invested in the help. I am already in the process of replacing Mrs. Cove, and if she should happen to turn up, you can tell her for me that she stands absolutely no chance of getting her old job back. I don’t take kindly to people that desert their posts. It’s a lesson I learned in the army.”

“Fought in the War, huh?”

“I was a medic in France, during the war. Won the Purple Heart; I was wounded while trying to care for a soldier who had just taken a piece of shrapnel in his brain. Before I could move, a shell came down close to our dugout. Everyone with me was killed.”

He paused, drained his glass, and said, “But that was many years ago. Would you care to see it? It’s over there on the mantle.”

Duly impressed, Baumgartner pointed to the glass case on the mantle, and said, “Is that it?”

“That’s it.”

He got up and walked to the gleaming glass. It was an impressive thing, still shining beautifully from the drab light filtering in from the windows. Upstairs, he had noticed, the windows were covered with dark, heavy drapes--blackout curtains, really. He turned, said suddenly, “I fought in the war myself. I was lucky. I was wounded in the Ardennes. Any man that was there can tell you the chances for getting out were slim. So many good men that I knew died there.”

He acquired a distant look for a moment, before shoving on with, “That is not, however, why I am here. Tell me: what else can you tell me about Mrs. Cove? Did she ever say anything that would give you any indication that she was the sort that might just pick up and leave town without giving anyone any notice?”

Tanzler scratched the fuzz on his chin for a moment, before replying, “No. Absolutely not. She wasn’t the sort to ever let a peep about anything personal. Wouldn’t have told me, even if she was as excited as a swarm of bees over something. Like I said, she knew better than to burden me with her world.”

“I see.”

Pause.

“You were never, I take it, romantically involved with Mrs. Cove?”

At the suggestion, Tanzler reared back his head and laughed.

“Good Lord! What the hell sort of man do you take me for? Absolutely not! Not that it would be any of your damn business anyway, Mr. Baumgartner, but, I can assure you, if I was given to having affairs, Mrs. Cove would be the last female on the planet I would approach in that particular regard. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I really must get ready. Have a lodge meeting this evening...”

“Just...a couple more questions, and I promise you, I’ll be off. You never, I take it, heard Mrs. Cove speak about any kind of boyfriend or male friend she might have gone away with?”

“N-no, Mr. Baumgartner...How many times must I make myself clear?: Imelda Cove was a locked box when it came to her private life, and I liked it that way just fine. We didn’t flirt, frolic, or fornicate in all the years I knew her, nor did I ever expect us to. If you want to know the truth, I haven’t seen her for at least three weeks, on I think, oh, let’s see, September 9th was most likely her last day here...I am simply a man that she worked for. I can’t make it any plainer than that.”

Mr. Baumgartner scribbled in his notebook for a moment, then said, “Okay, that should be it, Doc. Listen, would it be alright if I have the telephone number here, just in case I need to get a hold of you for any reason?”

“Sure thing. Sorry if I seem a bit cranky, but I haven’t been getting a lot of sleep lately.”

“Oh I understand. Okay, great.”

Tanzler had reached into his pants and gotten one of his cards, handing it upward with a (Baumgartner thought) slightly trembling hand. He took it, looked at it briefly, looked at the old man, took out his wallet, inserted the card, folded it back neatly, and then thrust out his hand. He took the trembling fingers of Tanzler, gave the hand a firm shake, decided he didn’t like the clammy, moist texture, said, “It sure is an honor to shake hands with a man that’s been awarded the Purple Heart. It really has been a pleasure meeting you today, Sir. “

“Thank you, Mr. Baumgartner. Would that it could have been under more pleasant circumstances.”

He rose, creakily, from his seat. The men exchanged small talk about the military and their respective histories for several moments, then, putting his

battered old fedora on his head, Baumgartner said, "I can see myself out, Doc. Have a wonderful day! Hope to talk to you again real soon."

Tanzler nodded, smiling as he listened to Baumgartner's shoes clack down the hall and out the front door. After he heard the resounding thump of it being shut, he sighed to himself, waited a moment, and got back up from his chair. He needed a sedative. His heart was suddenly hammering very quickly.

Baumgartner walked out to his car across the street, whistling.

That had been very fruitful. He was happy for the first time today; he was definitely going to deserve his pay.

Of course the old man had been lying. Had never served a day in his life. Most probably the medal was a fake, or he had bought it from a disabled vet who was down on his luck. It made him sick whenever he found some old geezer wandering around, pretending like he was some sort of war hero, when, in reality, he was nothing more than a pathetic liar.

He, of course, really had been wounded in the Ardennes, had received his own Purple Heart for valor, had fought in the deadliest battles of the Great War, and had got his hands bloody killing the Kaiser's "Iron Youth". He spat, opened the car door, got in, and sat at the wheel for a moment.

He was going to trim this turkey; was determined to, now, since he had so brazenly lied about his service. An ex-military man just *knew*, and encountering that suave duck, looking at his whole bearing, and listening to his phony talk had tipped Baumgartner off from the get-go about Tanzler's lies.

Of course, he was also sure the fighting in the war wasn't the only thing the old man had been lying about. He was certain that the only truth Tanzler had told him in the entire forty-five minute interview was that he had never been to bed with Imelda Cove; and, to be quite honest, Donald Baumgartner even had his doubts about that.

Of course, he had also told a lie himself, a real whopper. His employer wasn't Imelda Cove's daughter; Imelda Cove, as far as he could ascertain, had no daughter, and her husband was long since dead. She had no known next-of-kin at all, as far as he could surmise.

His employer was, in fact, one Gertrude Steinmetz, a woman with a rather peculiar fear that her daughter's former lover, Tanzler (the thought made him queasy), had had something to do with her sudden, mysterious death. He had been hired to snoop around, and he had personally lowered

his rates as far as he could to assist this particular family. Something about them, about their story, had touched him.

Of course, Tanzler had lied about Mrs. Cove not being a “gossip”. He had also lied about not being the sort of man that “had affairs” as, apparently, he had been prepared to marry Rose Steinmetz before her strange passing. He didn’t think, deep inside his intuitive self, that Tanzler had actually killed her; he didn’t believe that Tanzler was playing with a full deck, either.

He listened to the world a moment from the driver’s seat. It was a strangely quiet morning, and the wind had picked up the sound of soft organ music coming from upstairs in the Tanzler house. He listened to a low, mournful music that sounded like the piping of old hymns at a funeral. It stopped intermittently and was replaced with a heated whisper. He tried to listen for the words, assumed Tanzler was talking to himself, and started the car.

He would be back later. He would make sure the old man was out, first.

Book 2

Part 1

In the greenest of our valleys
By good angels tenanted,
Once a fair and stately palace--
Radiant palace--raised its head.
In the monarch Thought's dominion
It stood there!
Never seraph spread a pinion
Over fabric half so fair! -- Edgar Allen Poe

He was driving on a broad street, after dark.

“We’ll be there in just a few moments,” she said. He turned. Rose was in the passenger seat, apparently guiding this bizarre outing. He continued to creeping the neighborhood, happy at least that it was a warm night.

“Where are we going, Rose?”

“Just a short distance further. Really, I think you’re beginning to act like a child, considering it was you, and you alone, at started this whole affair.”

“So be it. I suppose you’re the leader now. You, with a finely-tuned brain, forever picking up your signals from that other world.”

“It isn’t my fault. If I could have had things differently, I would have. Turn here--”

He went slowly down an alley, that inclined between two high hills.

“Park the car. There’s a good boy. Now get out.”

He did as she told him, got out, stepping up on the crest of the hill to do so, and took a look around him at the ramshackle houses that stood, like decrepit sentinels, on either side of the dipping alleyway.

Rose crunched gravel beneath her heels, and said, “Are you in the mood for a little climb? Pretty steep on both sides, isn’t it?”

“That it is, Rose Tanzler. That it is.”

A gentle fog had been creeping in for many minutes now, and suddenly came on thick and still, obscuring objects in the distance, and bringing the face of his beloved into a sharp, crystalline focus as she drew near. The car seemed to sweat, coolly, in the night. He saw a beauty to it all, but he felt too weary, at the moment to climb that hill with her.

“I suggest we try a different approach,” she said, as suddenly the fog seemed to close in around them. Tanzler could feel an icy grip wrap itself around his body, and he could feel a slight pull through space, but in what seemed only a moment they found themselves standing at the top of the hill, under an old tree, looking up at a window.

“There it is.”

“That? That’s what you wanted, eh?”

“It’s fresh. And they command it. I can hear them screaming my name.”

“Who are they? The dead? Can you hear them howl so well?”

“I am them. I am still one of them, and always will be. Until the end of the world.”

“No, you’re my Rose, and you’re alive again. I don’t want to watch this. Let them carry me home now.”

She didn’t answer him, but in the next moment, he saw her move slowly, across the yard, into the darkness. Her feet seemed to barely touch the ground.

Emily Ford lay in bed, shivering in the darkness. Her teddy bear was pulled closely up to her chin, and she could feel the first few tendrils of sleep caress her mind, as she closed her eyes and dipped her dreaming consciousness into a world where clowns and candy canes skipped merrily

along. Suddenly, out of the dark she heard the sound of a slight tapping at her window.

Her eyes shot open, bleary sleep still masking the images moving in the streaming swirl of fog and moonlight. She was suddenly too frightened to move or call out.

She could see a dim shape at her window, distinct against the thick fog that enclosed the entire yard. Emily sat back against the headboard, clutching her teddy bear tightly, whimpering.

There was a strange woman outside her window.

The woman was floating.

There's no need to be frightened of me, my dear. I don't want to hurt you.

"W-who are you? What do you want?"

I'm a witch. I'm a good witch. I'm here to take you for a visit to a magic land. A land of dreams and wonders. A land just like out of a fairy tale. But this land is real. And, when you want to you can come back anytime.

At this the little girl seemed to relax somewhat. Her hold on her teddy bear loosened, and she crept forward on the mattress. She was not crying, but now seemed genuinely intrigued.

"What do I have to do to go there?"

The woman outside her window smiled. She had a friendly, if slightly funny smile, the little girl thought.

That's easy. Just open the window, and come with me. You'll love it in this magic land: there are candy cane trees, and rivers of chocolate. Do you like chocolate?

The little girl nodded her head.

Wonderful. Peanut butter mountains there are, and soft, fluffy clouds of marshmallow. And it is never winter, and always spring.

The little girl had gotten out of bed now, was standing near the window, looking out at her with an intently interested face. She may have thought that she was still dreaming, but, to Rose, it mattered very little.

She could feel the blood pumping in her skull, the hunger rising in her parched veins; the world was simply a giant oyster now, waiting to be sucked dry for all it was worth. She smiled again; her mouth was aching.

C'mon, open the window. Open the window and we can be off. You'll be back before anyone even knows that you were gone.

Carl was slumped beneath the tree in horror. The fog seemed to be closing in on him from all sides, strangling the last vestiges of hope from his body, and suffocating him of air. He could feel invisible fingers wrap their

tendrils around his life, and something seemed to be pressing against his chest. He suddenly asked God, whom he did believe in, but did not particularly revere,

“What should I do? What on earth would you have me do?”

Sleep.

He felt his eyelids tremble and collapse, and consciousness drift away.

When he awoke it was in his own bed. Rose was sitting, with her hands folded, by the window, staring off down the street. The sunset was peeping out from behind the tall stand of elms across the street.

“The sun shines off the water beautifully,” she said. Her voice was flat and expressionless.

He heard it, half-heard what she said, at any rate, and began to stir himself. He felt as if he had been dragged through hell and back, and he could barely remember last night. One image did stand out to him, and for a moment he sat in bed sullenly, ignoring her while he tried to set his mind straight.

“They’ll come for us now,” he said, flatly. “There must have been witnesses, people who saw us driving around, saw us leave...”

“They’ll never come for us. The dead are helping us, assisting us. The fog covered our movements and actions. There were no witnesses.”

“Why in God’s name would the dead do anything for one that had escaped their clutches? Aren’t you, in a manner of speaking, a sort of fugitive?”

“Yes. I am also an emissary. The dead are not simply an extension of humanity; they are separate from humanity. They are their own race, religion, nation...I am their ambassador.”

“Oh, it’s preposterous. But, Rose, we cannot sustain your... *appetites* in this fashion, any longer.”

He suddenly felt his gorge rise, and a sickening new feeling of revulsion swam through him as his emotional defenses reeled under the full impact of what had been transpiring for the last several weeks.

She turned, said, “So you find me disgusting now, is that it? Hideous and revolting? A monstrous human leech that preys on innocent people. Aren’t you sorry that you ever met me?”

She turned again, and he thought, for a brief moment, that he could see tears trickling down the lean curve of her face.

He bounded from the bed, approached her, put his hands on her

shoulders and nearly turned her about, telling her, “Rose, I know you don’t for a moment believe that. You know how deeply I love you. I’d risk hell and damnation just to be with you.”

“And Hell is where we belong...and it’s where we are headed.”

“No, you mustn’t think that way. I don’t think you can be blamed for wanting to stay alive, to stay strong. You’re not the same woman who died, not the same Rose. You are Rose, in a sense, but in a sense ...you are the dead, now. As you stated, the dead have different needs than the living. A lion has different needs than a lamb: one eats the other and the other obliges by virtue of its weakness. And we, Rose, are stronger than anyone we’ve hurt. Are we not?”

“It is a world of predators and prey, isn’t it Carl? One can see these things so much clearer when one has been to Hell and back; the world seems full of little sensations, people scurrying about trying to satisfy this or that need, to fulfill whatever lust or passion burns most brightly in their heart. But finally, it is all in vain. Only survival is the true mark and measure of what separates the victor from the vanquished.”

“You speak words of wisdom. You were always an intelligent girl.”

“I’m more than that now, and you know it. We’ve been released. Carl, couldn’t you face death now, and not blink or show one fillip of emotion? You would be with me. I am the dead. There is no separation but this veil of skin.”

“And what of the soul, hm? Locked away in a presence of essential stuff until, finally, it is freed . But the body remains, and the body is where our illusion of personality resides. Well, bugger the soul and let God have it. I’ll take my personality and yours over any intangible...”

He trailed off; he had been bent low before her. Now he stood, straightened himself, and noticed a peculiar hump rising below the covers at the foot of the bed.

“Rose? What’s this?”

Silence.

He walked over, tossed back the covers, and reeled.

The body of a small girl lay plastered to the sheets at the foot of the bed.

It had taken him awhile to dispose of the remains, and he could feel the tension and pressure and panic increase as he busily sawed away arms and legs, placing everything in his special antique tub to soak in acid.

He felt himself caught in the middle of some bizarre nightmare; yet, he felt very little fear beyond what he knew must be their eventual discovery

by the police. It could only be so long before they would trace the ever-increasing trail of bodies back to his doorstep, and when they did, he would immediately hit the newspapers as a sort of all-time ghoul, or the “Ghoul of the Century” even. He didn’t want to be remembered that way.

It was a part of his expertise that he managed to crawl into a bottom window with cat-like stealth . He had been watching for the old man’s coming and goings, had decided tonight would be the best night to make an attempt to get into the house and have a look around. He was an old hand at this, and anticipated no problems.

He had climbed the fence in the back fairly easily, had crept across the lawn in the darkness, feeling the frost creep into his bones as his heart began to hammer with excitement. He had brought along his special tools, a collection of lock picks that he found to be full-proof. He would slip around the back to the kitchen door,

His feet hit the carpet and he felt, all at once, a tremor of uneasiness steal through him. All was dark and quiet; Tanzler made sure at least to extinguish every light in the house before he left. He walked quickly through the back kitchen, into the foyer, and headed for Tanzler’s office.

He opened the door, shining his penlight around in the dark, trying to keep the beam away from the window. He went to the desk, sat down in the chair, and began to open the drawers. There wasn’t much except the detritus that usually accumulates in a busy man’s desk, and he decided to go through the cabinets. He knew, for the time being, what he was searching for.

The bottom drawer of the desk was locked. He pulled, hearing the mechanism pop. He would have to make damn sure to wipe everything down for prints after, or he might be sharing a cell with his suspect. He shined his penlight inside, was unsurprised to find it reflect back the image of a dull brown bottle with a spoon tied to the top. He picked it up, holding his penknife between his teeth, placed it on the desk, and pulled out the cork. He shook a single gram onto his pinky, tasted, and knew at once that it was cocaine. It was no surprise to him; he had Tanzler pegged as a dope fiend all along.

He placed the bottle back in the drawer, and closed it softly. Check.

He got up, wondered if there were any other narcotics Tanzler had secreted for his own personal use, decided that finding the cocaine was confirmation enough, walked out of the office and shut the door, making sure to lock it. To the left of him, the staircase led upward to the good

doctor's private bedroom and living quarters. Up there, he surmised, the real information was just waiting for him to ferret out.

He went carefully up the steps, reminding himself that he had to be snappy, that the old man might return at any time and discover him, and made it to the top with only a few creaking floorboards to announce his presence. Up here, the darkness seemed more real, something that closed around you like a shroud. The beam of his torch was, also, beginning to go weak. He went slowly down the hall, not liking the empty, hollow thud of his own shoe leather on the floor.

He went straight back first, finding the door to the secret workshop. Whatever Tanzler had been doing, the signs of an obsessed craftsman lay all about: there were strips of silk cloth laid out on the table, bundles of wire, and what appeared to be a hardened block of wax. There was a portable stove for heating it, and pots and dips coated with the stuff. Whatever it was, he didn't think Tanzler had suddenly taken an interest in making candlesticks.

Everything appeared to be clean, though; he could find nothing else incriminating on the workbenches, or hanging from the walls, or in the giant, antique wash tub that rested ubiquitously in the corner. He walked out, somewhat perplexed.

He entered the bathroom, the guest room, and then stopped at the last door just before the top of the stairs. He thought, or rather knew, this had to be Tanzler's bedroom. He put his hand on the knob, turned, and shined his light inside.

The bed looked like it had been prepared for a wedding. It was a canopy bed, to begin with, and it was surrounded on all sides by heavy bouquet's of steadily-wilting flowers. The ever-present smell was worse in here; overpowering, really, and the flowers did little to mask it.

His heart suddenly leapt into his throat, and he walked toward the bed, bouncing his feeble light off the white silk canopy. There was a shadow shape in that bed, nestled beneath the covers. He knew it, and it did nothing to calm his nerves or ease his sudden sense of revulsion. He could hear a fly buzz past him as he moved forward, on slightly trembling legs.

He moved to the side of the bed closest the window. On a night table, beside the heavy vases of flowers, were little cups of ash that he knew must be the remains of strong incense, as well as prayer beads, a crucifix, a white candle, and photographs of the late Rose Steinmetz.

It was, of course, a shrine to Tanzler's Saint Rose, and he prepared himself as he studied the contours beneath the sheets, the dark silhouette

behind the canopy curtain. He put forth one hand, grasped the filmy white edge, and pulled it back.

For a moment, he was so astounded by the grotesquerie that presented itself to him that he was too stunned to speak. He was a hardened man, but suddenly he felt his stomach churn as he recoiled from the site that lay in the bed before him. The stench was overpoweringly nauseating, and it was all he could do to keep from coughing up his lunch as his flashlight beam played over the hideous features of the desiccated body in the bed.

It's face was a horrifying ball of wax, reconstructed crudely with paint and make-up to maintain some blasphemous resemblance to the woman these bones once had been. The hands were the same, shapeless waxen gloves. The eyes looked as if they were probably glass replicas. The body itself had clearly begun to cave inward, and must have been stuffed surgically with old rags to maintain any resemblance to the human form. What's more, the decay was not yet complete, and the bed clearly bore the signs of seepage and rot beneath the withered remains.

Several flies alighted suddenly.

He stepped backward, let the canopy curtain fall, and felt sick to his stomach.

Just then, a cold explosion erupted in his skull, and darkness closed in upon him.

Part 2

Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
On its roof did float and flow
(This--all this--was in the olden
Time long ago),
And every gentle air that dallied
In that sweet day,
Upon the ramparts plumed and pallid,
A winged odor went away. --Edgar Allen Poe

When he came to, it was with the gradual knowledge that he had been blackjacked. It was not the first time it had ever happened to him.

His hands were tied behind him with strips of cloth, and he strained for a moment. He was sitting in the workshop he realized; down the hall, he could hear the strains of Tanzler's Wurlitzer organ piercing the darkness. The old man was, obviously, as mad as a loon. He struggled against his

bonds, sat up, and managed to wriggle his hand free. Tanzler was, apparently, no expert at tying knots.

Or, hopefully, the old man secretly realized that the jig was up.

Once free, and standing on his two feet, he felt the hideous sore knot on the back of his head. It was a real shiner, and he staggered a bit as he moved forward to open the door. Unsurprisingly, his gun was gone.

He went down the hall to the door of Tanzler's room, thrust it open, and saw that the candles had been lit. The old man was seated at his organ, playing a melancholy dirge, and the heavy funk of incense seemed to permeate the air. He walked slowly toward the old man's back.

He was going to beat holy hell out of him.

Suddenly, Tanzler turned on the piano bench, Baumgartner's own gun clasped in his hand as he held the barrel, waveringly, on the advancing detective.

"Stop right where you are Baumgartner."

"Go ahead and shoot me, if you think it will do any good. I doubt very much that it's going to make that--"

He gestured to the bed.

--smell any better. Doc, if you don't mind me saying so, you're out of your skull. I think you need a nice, long holiday in a rubber room. Tell me: How do you stand this smell?"

He stared at him quietly for a moment, said, "I don't think you quite understand the situation into which you've, unthinkingly, blundered. I understand that you were hired by Imelda's daughter to ferret me out. Well, I can't have that. Not now, when we are so close to finally being complete with our work."

"And what is that? Keeping that cold pile of bones together with wax and wires?"

"She is *not* a cold pile of bones. She is merely resting, waiting, for the final sacrifice. Oh, you could not possibly understand, with your limited mind, what it is Rose and I have accomplished in such a short amount of time. We have broken through the barrier between *their* world, and ours. We are on the cusp of a new era, explorers of a new, untrammelled continent..."

He trailed off, his eyes fanatical burning coals. Baumgartner moved closer to him, imperceptibly, sizing up his chances of pouncing upon the lunatic and taking the gun away from him. Madmen are particularly dangerous, he knew, and armed madmen the most dangerous of all.

"What in the world are you talking about, Doc? You're right, I don't understand. Why don't you explain it to me, and then maybe we'll see if I

can understand what you're telling me, or not. When did you decide to take her body from the tomb?"

"I never decided such a thing. It was decided for me. I could hear them, you see; feel them. They're as vital as you or I. All you have to do is look for them, and you will see."

"Look for who, Doc?"

"The dead...they are not dead...they are, for want of a better term, *undead*. They are a new race, an entirely new species, reborn in the fetid womb of corruption and calling out from the grave for sustenance and life. Can't you hear their voices speaking, even now?"

He inched closer, as Tanzler's face fell strangely, his eyes casting about in the shadows on the floor.

"I've done...questionable things."

"Like what? Theft of a body? You loved her, and when she died it drove you to that particular action. It's not something everyone will understand, but it's not the crime of the century, either."

The old man was silent for a moment, his eyes hooded and gloomy, and then said, "I, or rather Rose and I, have killed three people. We killed Imelda Cove, and Rose drank off her blood and vitality. I dissolved her body in acid, flushed it down the drain."

Suddenly, Baumgartner knew the full extent of this man's delusion.

"Doc, you didn't kill anyone. You just imagined you did. It's not real, none of it. It's all in your mind."

"Preposterous! I know the difference between what is real and what is not. You're trying to trick me, you devious, underhanded little bastard, but I'm afraid it won't work."

Tanzler suddenly grew fiery with anger, his eyes blazing, and he held the gun tighter in his grasp, steadying the shaking barrel on Baumgartner's chest.

"Rose lives...lived again. She is resting now, waiting, in a larval state. She will hatch like a caterpillar from a cocoon, and the butterfly of her soul will take wings. She has been touched by the cosmic rays, ruled by the whispers of night, and we will be together, traversing that firmament between matter and soul. Do you hear me? You are to be the last. Your body and blood, for her..."

He cocked the gun. Baumgartner froze in place, said, "Tanzler, Imelda Cove is not dead. She's in Chicago. She met a fellow up there, and took off. I just spoke to her landlord yesterday. She contacted him about her unpaid rent, said she'd settle with him when she got her first check. She's fine. You

haven't killed anyone, and Rose has never stirred from that spot since the moment you laid her there from her own grave. I'd be willing to bet you haven't been seeing things straight for a long time. Now, c'mon, give me the gun. Give me the gun, and I'll prove Imelda Cove and the rest of this business is nothing more than a trick of your mind."

"I'm not a madman, damn you."

And, because there didn't seem to be much in the way of a response to that, Baumgartner suddenly took his chances, leaped for the gun, and grabbed Tanzler's wrist as the older man attempted to pull away from him.

They wrestled for a few moments, when suddenly, a loud report signaled that it was the end of the melee.

Tanzler crumpled in his grasp, falling to the floor in a heap, holding his chest. Yet, as Baumgartner approached him, breathing raggedly, he realized two things:

One, for Carl Tanzler, this was, most likely, the end of the line. After this, the crazy old bird would never see the light of day again.

Two, there was not a spot of blood on him, and the bullet had never found its mark. What Tanzler was suffering from now was most likely a mild heart attack.

Baumgartner rushed downstairs to find the telephone.

Part 3

Wanderers in that happy valley,
Through two luminous windows, saw
Spirits moving musically
To a lute's well-timed law.
Round about a throne where, sitting,
(Porphyrogene!)
In state his glory well befitting,
The ruler of the realm was seen. --Edgar Allen Poe

Doctor Chilton Chalmers reared back in his seat, put his feet on top of his desk, lit a cigarette, and yawned. Seated across from him, Donald Baumgartner was also smoking.

"Damnedest case I've ever had, Mr. Baumgartner. Man is a complete psychotic. He's totally broken ties with reality. He actually believed that he could bring that dead body back to life. Good thing you caught on to him

when you did, too. As I'm sure you've read in the papers, we believe he started prowling around the neighborhoods at night. Christ only knows what he was planning on doing, but we think his peeping-tom routine was a dress rehearsal for abduction. Possibly murder."

Donald Baumgartner stubbed out his cigarette, took out his notebook, and flipped through it slowly.

"He was spotted prowling around the yard of Joe Ford by a neighbor. Description tallied perfectly. It was only a matter of time before he was picked up by the cops on a morals charge. I just helped expedite matters a little. So, any closer to understanding what it was that put him so over the edge?"

Dr. Chalmers sighed, stubbed out his cigarette, and lifted a small paper cup of coffee to his lips, reflectively.

"The mind is a mystery... as to how it works, who can say? We only have the barest understanding ourselves, and we've been in this game a long time. My own guess was that it was a combination of loss, loneliness, and a predisposition to fantastic thinking... His library was choked full of weird books on occult and arcane subjects."

Baumgartner considered, "Maybe just a pervert? A guy that invented a whole fantasy world around the object of his obsession. I'm afraid I'm going to need something more for my readers."

Dr. Chalmers shrugged his shoulders, yawned again, "Who can say? He's told us so much paranoid babble... stuff about death worshipping cults, magic, zombies. Real voodoo stuff. Apparently, he had been to see a local fortune teller, a woman goes under the name 'Madame Zemindar', or some such damned foolishness. She clammed up pretty quick, but I take it she has a rap sheet herself a mile long. Says she gave Tanzler a few tarot readings, he talked about ghosts and life after death, religious subjects mostly. Now, get this: she refused to answer most of the questions the cops put to her. Said it violated the right to confidentiality she shared with all her clients. Will you get a load of that malarkey?"

"Ridiculous."

Tanzler came to in the silence of a dark room. He could barely feel his arms. They seemed to be locked into place by straps. It was bare moments, his eyes rapidly adjusting to the dark, before he could hear a kind of slow, scrabbling steps near him. He raised his head. He was strapped into a very rough, uncomfortable wooden chair. His hair hung in greasy strands before his eyes, and his bladder hammered miserably.

A shaft of clear moonlight illuminated, suddenly, more than he cared to ever see. It was a padded cell.

He could smell waste and dirt and oily skin faintly floating in the stale air. He lifted his head. Before him, crouching in the murk, a pitiful character--clearly an imbecile--was crouched toward the wall, its feet curled up beneath it and a streamer of drool and mucus leaking down from its gaping, fish-like mouth. It was gabbling a bizarre mantra that Tanzler couldn't understand.

He tried to struggle forward, realized it was no use, and resigned himself for a moment to shutting his eyes and trying to reawaken the fantastic images of the dream he had been having.

Finding it pointless, he swallowed hard, blinked, and testily spat out, "What is that? What is that you are saying?"

The little figure in front of him drew closer, until he could smell the foul stale blast of its breath. It was a hunched, miserable little shape, little more than a hunchbacked toad, and he could tell by the slackened jaw and bugging, imbecilic eyes it was little more than a mental degenerate. What's more, the foul rags it wore on its body gave off a stench that was somewhat beyond belief. He recoiled, sneered, felt his head grow woozy, and said to himself, "Hell. I've died and gone to hell, and it's full of half-wits, pinheads, and mutants."

The figure in front of him said, in a voice that was loud and strangely hollow, as if it emerged straight from the chest and exited, without any emotion save for fury, from the yellow, clacking teeth.

"My name is Esmeralda and I'm pleased to meet you. I want to tell you about Jesus."

"I already know all about him. Thanks."

He stuttered for a moment, then said, "You had better be good here. If you ain't good here, you're gonna get a spanking."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Suddenly, from the darkness behind him, he heard a rough, gravelly voice chirp up, "Aw, don't listen to that old thing! Nobody gets out of here alive, anyhow. Doesn't matter what you do or don't do. Do you know where you are, fella?"

He tried to twist his head around to see. More and more, he could see the contours of the holding cell clearly. Behind him, a man squatted over a bucket, and a tall, scarecrow-like being perched atop a bench muttered to himself and chewed on his fingers. He saw a form or two move around him; hulking, confused shapes that made him feel uncomfortably close to a

terrified anger. He bucked up. He would remain stronger than any bonds they could tie him with.

“I suppose in a sanitarium. I’ve been indisposed lately.”

In truth, the past twenty odd hours had been a blur. He had been rushed to a hospital, but the doctors had deduced nothing physically wrong with him. He was suffering, they assumed, from a form of hysteria and had blacked out. When he had come to, his first notion had been to continue to struggle against the hands of his captors. That had not been wise.

He had attempted to leave the hospital bed, accusing the nurses and doctors of committing a grievous offence against him. Of course, the hallway was being guarded by a policeman, and a general throng of reporters (some from as far away as Chicago and Detroit) had descended like vultures to get their glimpse of the sensational “Graveyard Valentino”. It was a story that had the potential to inflame readers from coast to coast.

(It had certainly inflamed the passions of the local Ku Klux Klan, who had damn near come close to starting up a lynching posse before it was made apparent to them, by members that were off-duty policemen, that Tanzler would be watched like a hawk, his case being so unique it would surely draw attention all across the country.

The Imperial Klaliff spat angrily, kicked the dirt, and lamented the fact that they were indeed powerless to get their hands on that “no-account Jew sonofabitch”. They did, however, make plans to find, kidnap, and hang the old man, should he ever again be released into society.)

Tanzler had been given a heavy dose of what he took to be morphine, and had slowly descended again into a stupor. He had not stopped to consider the furor that was taking place in the community, as word of the grisly discovery of Rose’s body had spread like wildfire. Nor, in truth, did he care one whit, anymore.

His next memories involved being wheeled, half-unconscious, into a courtroom, where a judge quickly pronounced him, presently, unfit to stand trial. The old man hadn’t really done him any favors, he now reflected.

Everywhere he turned, every pair of eyes that had met his on his way from the hospital, to the courtroom, to this final destination, had bore the same look of repulsion and fear, and he knew now, as he had never known before, the cold hatred that emanated from alienation and social scorn. And he had met that hatred with stoicism. Of course, the continual flow of sedatives they kept injecting into his arm helped considerably.

“Aw, listen to the man! Hey, buddy, do you think that you’re better than me, huh? I bet you think you’re too good to be in here with the rest of us

rats. Well, I know who you are and I know what you are. And you're just another freak like all the rest of us. Hey, I want you to see me."

A shadow approached him from behind, kneeling low into his face. He suddenly saw before him a face so strange that it nearly roused him from his stupor.

It was a badly-scarred nightmare, and nothing about the shape suggested what sex it might be, although he realized it must be male. The hair was long and stringy and the body itself was filthy. The long, tattered gown must have once been white; it was now mostly yellow.

"What are you?" He asked, spitefully. He felt no fear, none at all.

"I know what you think. When I was a kid, I first learned that I was neither a boy or a girl. Do you know what that does to you, huh Mister? My Mommy didn't know whether or not to name me Billy or Betty. Look at this thing. What could I do with this useless thing?"

It lifted the hem of the robe, and flashed its genitalia at him, but he merely lowered his eyes to slits, and spat, "So. What do you expect me to do about it? Join a carnival I say, you two-sexed freak."

"Just what I expected you to say. Just what I expected. Look at my face, Mister. I done this to myself. One night I knew I couldn't take it any longer, and so I got a can of gasoline, and I soaked the curtains of my house, and then I stood in the living room and flicked a match. Whole place went up like a tinder box. I barely got out alive, if you can call this living."

Suddenly, Tanzler heard a sort of gurgling cry rise from behind him, and he realized that there was another unseen presence in the room with them. A vast hulking shape seemed to appear in the darkness like a great bear, and began to cry and scream and beat his fists together all at the same time. The hermaphrodite suddenly grabbed him by his hair, yanking his head as he twisted in futility against his bonds.

"Now see what you caused! See what you caused! We'll all be flayed alive now! Oh I tell you, there will be hell to pay!"

Tanzler listened as he heard the slop bucket kicked over, and the repulsive contents go splashing across the floor. The little toad-like creature began to gabble again, imploring Jesus to come and save them all from the wrath of the great hulk, who even now was lumbering around the room in a paroxysm of rage and angst, beating his fists back and forth savagely. Pandemonium erupted, and Tanzler felt his head twisted around. Inconveniently, he was the only one in the room restrained in a seat.

Suddenly, mercifully, he caught the bobbing beam of a flashlight from down the hall, and two large shapes loomed at the barred door in front. They

shined the beam inside, and then banged loudly with a rubber truncheon.

“Quiet in there, you bastards! Don’t make us have to come in there!”

“Help! Help me, in the name of God! Don’t leave me in here at the mercy of these animals!”

Suddenly, the door flew open, and the hulking shapes entered, swinging their clubs with merciless abandon, as the smaller inmates ran to corners to cower. The great bear of a lunatic continued to rage and cry, imploring God, his mother, his “Nanny”, and all the wretched demons of hell to set him free of his cursed existence.

“You! You want to go into restraints tonight? Huh? Better calm down, old hoss!”

“No...I don’t wanna go...I’ll be good. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’ve been a bad boy. Aw, I’m sorry. Don’t, don’t hit me...I’ll be good. Aw!”

The great monster of a man jammed his fists into his eyes, and began blubbering like a freakishly overgrown baby. The attendant seemed to relax a bit, and said, “Alright, then mind your manners and keep quiet till morning.”

While that man was occupied with the giant, his partner came around in front of Tanzler. It was too dark to properly see his face, but Tanzler knew he was studying him with loathing, fascinated eyes. He pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket, stuck it in the corner of his mouth, pulled a match, flicked it on his fingernail, and lit up.

“Hey, hey Rube. You got one of them for me?”

The hermaphrodite had crept back into the dismal light creeping in from the hallway, and implored the man. He paused for a second, handed him/her the one he had just lit, and then got another for himself.

“Better hurry up Glenn. We ain’t suppose to be giving smokes to the patients.”

Glenn inhaled greedily, and the other attendant joined his comrade in front of Tanzler. Both men seemed particularly intrigued by the notoriety of their new charge.

“Lobotomy?”

His friend turned around, as if Tanzler wasn’t even there, and said, “You bet your sweet ass. Lobotomy if he’s lucky.”

Both men broke into rasping laughter, and turning, strode back out, slamming the door behind them.

Glenn approached Tanzler, the end of the cigarette still held between her fingers, her eyes twin moons of exquisite sadistic exultation, and said, “You know what it feels like to burn all over your body...Tanzler? You know

what it feels like to burn, and burn, and burn, forever?”

“It must feel like hell.”

His mind went to a place where none of this mattered any longer. It was the same solid, walled-in spot that had first taken Rose from her crypt, and brought her back to life with the powers of his own indomitable will. It was a place beyond the reach of terror and pain. Glenn brought the smoldering tip of the cigarette close to Tanzler’s eye. He watched in perfect, stoic concentration, and his mind faded from the room.

It was morning, and the first crack of dawn across the horizon had welcomed him like a smile from the face of God. He had risen from bed, excited at the prospect of tramping around in the woods with his father and grandfather today, hunting squirrels.

He had washed his face, put on his best pair of bib overalls, and walked quietly downstairs, smelling the first good smells of coffee and bacon frying. He seated himself at the table, eager to begin eating. His mother looked back at him, her eyes large and tired, and her hair frayed. She seemed to have not slept much last night, and as she set the plate down for him, and as he listened to his brother grumble up and down the stairs to start the first of the morning’s chores, (Pa had, expressly, told his brother to stay home today from the hunt, and take up Carl’s share of the work, a prospect that had done nothing to amuse him) he felt like the luckiest boy in all the world.

His little sister sat beside him, eating with the drowsy enthusiasm of a child that awakes from a pleasant sleep with a famishing hunger. Soon, Pa would be back in for his breakfast (after, of course, making sure that Carl’s big brother did not slack off on doing the double portion of work allotted him today), and then they would both go out to watch the morning break, and Granpa would come riding in on his old mule, a proud, ragged old man in a great tall hat and old coat.

Of course, Granpa was not really his Granpa; Carl’s Granpa was dead and buried over in Germany a dozen years back. This Granpa was a German immigrant, like Carl’s father, and had lived in the neighborhood for time out of mind. He had helped Pa establish the farm, and had always been around to lend a hand.

In return, he had only asked the occasional supper, and to spend time with the family, as his own wife had passed and his children had all gone away. He had loved the children, deeply, and had become a part of the Tanzler clan just as sure as if he had actually been their elderly patriarch.

Pa had led him, merrily, from his seat at the table, and with a cup of

steaming coffee in his hand, had brought little Carl out of the front porch. The last few vestiges of early morning were shrugging themselves away, when a familiar shape came riding up, just over the hill.

“Guten Morgen, Herr Tanzler!”

Carl’s father called back a hearty German good morning to the old man, who hitched his old mule up to the fence post, and strode toward the porch as tall and as dignified as ever.

“How are you, *Mien Kinder*, this morning? So your Papa tells me you are going out with us today. I am very glad, for we have much to discuss.”

And with that, the old man rolled a cigarette with one crooked hand, strode up onto the porch, went in and greeted Frau Tanzler, and took some coffee. Within the hour, they were off, Granpa and Carl sitting in the hay in back of the wagon while Carl Sr. drove.

Little Carl soon realized that Granpa was looking particularly aged, and weary today, and had to stop intermittently to take a rest. His own father was understanding, and had grown strangely quiet. The sun had continued its steadily creep upward, and now the day seemed as if it were going to be blazing hot.

They had finally climbed their way carefully into a thicket of trees by the side of the road, and proceeded down over brambles and heavy roots, and through bushes until they finally made their way to an old trail that Carl knew must have been there since the time of the Indians. His father and Granpa each had their guns with them, rested on their shoulders, and little Carl had been left to carry a pack that included some lunch, extra ammunition, and a canteen.

After a time of lugging the stuff around he began to sweat, and he would momentarily look up to his father, who strode ahead of them in somber silence. “Are we there yet, Papa?” he would ask. His father would look over his shoulder, and say gruffly, “Not yet boy. But soon. Just a bit further out.”

He held onto Granpa’s hand for awhile, not really liking the unpleasant roughness of it. He could hear the old man wheeze, hear his chest rattle and whirr like a crazy clock.

“Are you okay, Granpa?”

Carl looked up at him apprehensively. He loved Granpa like no one else in the entire world.

“Yeah. Say, you better hurry on up ahead if you want to catch up to your Pa.”

Granpa pushed him up ahead a little, trailing back, his gun still cocked over his shoulder in the manner of an old soldier. Carl went ahead into the

brush, just as far as he could see his father's back as he crept with his gun poised, then dove behind a tree.

He watched in awe as Granpa bent low, coughing miserably, and unleashed a thick streamer of mucus from his mouth. He looked to be gasping for air, and his face was the queerest color Carl had ever seen.

He stalled for a minute, until he heard Granpa's boots come crashing through the undergrowth, and then hurried on ahead to Pa.

"Pa," he asked, with a growing sense of bewilderment. "Is there something wrong with Granpa?"

Carl's father continued to look straight ahead, his jaw tightening perceptibly. He looked, all of a sudden, as unhappy as hell.

"Tell you what, Son. Let's stop and take lunch."

They walked on ahead for a few paces, until they came to a little natural clearing. The noonday sun cut through the thick curtain of leaves in little, dancing snakes and strange, shifting pools that gave Carl a real feeling of weirdness he would never, really forget.

The world seemed painted, at that moment, in deep greens, dark browns, and cast-about pools of shadow, stretching into a woodland blur. He sat down on a great dead log, beside his Pa, and started to unpack their food.

While they began to munch silently, Carl turned the events of the day, so far, over in his head. Somehow, nothing had seemed right. Pa and Granpa were both acting mighty peculiarly, but he wasn't sure he could really put his finger on it. He could hear Granpa coming up to meet them through the darkness of the trees, his tread old and steady as his heels came down upon weeds and shrub.

"Pa, when I asked you if something was wrong with Granpa, you never answered me. Why is that, Pa?"

Carl's father considered a moment, took a swig from the canteen, and suddenly felt his sweat cool on his body.

"Maybe you should ask him that question, Son."

As if in answer to his father, Granpa appeared suddenly, made his way to the old log, and bent down low in front of them. His eyes were the color of muddy water, and Carl could suddenly see the deep wells of pain and awesome exhaustion deep within his face. Granpa looked like a man that had come to accept an awful truth, and had resigned himself to it.

"My child, your Granpa is not well. Truth is Carl, I'm dying. Doctor up in Ft. Wayne says it's just a matter of time. Maybe a few weeks. I got cancer, Carl. You know what that is?"

Carl shook his head. He immediately felt a huge well of sorrow begin to

rise in his chest, and he felt his breath grow ragged.

“You see, that’s why I was so glad your Pa brought you out here with us, today. I wanted to be able to say goodbye to you. You see, when you and your Pa head home tonight, I’m going to stay right here, and I’m going to wait for Old Man Death to come and get me.”

Carl began to cry, and reached forward to clutch the old man to him. Granpa held him for a bit, and even Carl’s father was wiping tears from his eyes now.

“Now, Carl, don’t be that way now. It is just a part of life, and we all have to face it eventually. Now, I have had a long life, Carl. A good life. But it’s over, and I want to go out like a man...with a little dignity left.”

Carl felt his father’s hand on his shoulder, and heard him say, “It’s the way the Indians do it, Son. Granpa use to live among them, years ago out West. Didn’t you Granpa?”

Granpa looked over at Pa, nodded his head slowly, and said “Ayup. I was made an honorary Blackfoot by Chief Raven-Who-Takes-No-Flight. So, you see, this is just the way it has to be, Carl. Hey, now...”

Carl began to weep furiously, and his father looked, for a moment, as if he might join him. Instead, he stood up, dusted off his trousers, and said, “C’mon. Let us not ruin this last time together. Carl, c’mon now.”

Carl wiped tears from his face. His cheeks felt hot and flushed, and his heart felt like a lead weight. His legs and arms were numb, but, somehow, he managed to trudge forward for an hour or so, behind Pa and Granpa, who walked ahead a little, taking a few half-hearted shots here and there.

Carl could hear them whispering to each other softly, intermittently, but he made no effort to listen in. He could barely look at Granpa now. Every time he caught sight of him, a peculiar mixture of fear, anger, sorrow, and disbelief seemed to wash over him all at once.

Finally, as the sun began to dip down below the trees, and the twilight gloom began to wax strong, Carl’s father turned to him, said, “Junior, it’s time to go home now. You got something you want to say?”

Carl turned to look up into the face of the man he considered his grandpa. The face looked old, seamed, but there were no tears there. The image of a man ten feet tall suddenly faded, forever, from Carl’s mind. Now, Granpa looked simply old and worn-out; exhausted.

Carl tried to choke out a few words, but found his tongue swelling up. His throat ached miserably, and tears began to stream down his little cheeks again.

“I love you, Carl. I want you to know that. Good bye.”

He bent down, hugged the boy to him, and Carl felt his frailness through the old flannel shirt. He stepped back, weeping inconsolably now, his head resting on his chest, his fists jammed into his trouser pockets. Pa walked up to Granpa, took his hand, and spoke softly. Suddenly, he leaned forward and grasped the old man in a bear hug. Then, patting his shoulders, he turned, picked up his gun, saluted, and walked over to Carl, putting his hand on his shoulder.

Carl never looked back.

As they drove the buggy back along the rutted road, Carl sat alone amidst the hay in the back of the wagon, feeling cold and alone, and drowned in despair, Pa sat silently driving the wagon, his stout back slumped considerably. Suddenly, in the stillness of the gathering night, a clear, loud gunshot rang out in the evening air. Carl felt lightening rip through his body.

“Pa, Granpa is dead, isn’t he? Pa?”

Carl felt a tidal wave of grief crush him.

“Yes,” his father said, his voice flat and steady. That evening, just before nightfall, Pa stood out on the porch, smoking his pipe. When he finally went in, his face ran wet with silent tears.

Tanzler felt himself drawn from his reverie. He had intentionally blanked out his reasoning, retreated into the past, in anticipation of the pain of being burnt with the smoldering butt of the cigarette. But, suddenly, the scarred face pulled back his hand, his eyes a baleful cold gleam of insanity, and said something unintelligible.

He then put the cigarette on his own face, burying it amidst the lunar surface of pocked, repulsive skin.

It was to the drab, white ward, with its endless screams, mutters, imprecations, and stifled tears, that Tanzler was to be confined for many seemingly interminable days.

The medication (when it was administered) was apparently something experimental. Whatever the hell it was, it sufficiently dulled his faculties to make the passing hours seem like a floating string of oblivious instances put together in a dream-like, unrealistic pattern. He neither saw nor cared anymore.

The sun rose and set.

The food cart delivered a mess of slop, sometimes little better than gruel

or mash, and very rarely anything approaching meat, but he ate everything with the ravening appetite of a wolf. The warders were sometimes brutal, more often than not they were simply unconcerned; the idiot tide of the assembled patients were herded together, left to their own devices, suffered to shut up, to wait, to undergo whatever new torture the doctors had devised, and to finally lose interest in everything but their own private world of terrors, dreams, and delirium.

The worst of it, as far as Tanzler was concerned, was the inadequate hygiene forced upon him by circumstance. Once a month, the patients were trotted out to an enclosed courtyard, stripped down naked, handed a bar of soap, and hosed down. Very often, complete imbeciles stood there, soap in hand, unable to comprehend the simple logistics of cleaning their stinking bodies. Others, more tired, unused to the wash of sun or the crisp coolness of a breeze, began to hurriedly scrub their flabby, white forms, gathering a bit of lather in the essential spots, and shivering under the blast of the spray. This ritual did little, in Tanzler's mind, to improve the condition of the smell on the general ward.

There were no recreations; no paintings, no books or magazines, no films, walks, or any amenities whatsoever. There was compulsory religious instruction once a week, in a small chapel filled with the ambulatory and the docile, and presided over by a tall, gaunt specter of an old Baptist minister. The services were, inevitably, verbal harangues and were most often greeted with drooling, mumbling, blank stares, a few chaotic shouts, and utter indifference.

Most of his days were spent peering through the heavy, grated window at the bit of sky that could be seen beyond the fence, outside. Occasionally, he caught sight of a few birds, some passing clouds, and the gentle blue of the rolling sky. He let his mind wander outward, taking himself away from the constant, murmuring insanity that shuffled about him. He began, for the first time in his life, to withdraw into the shell of the senile old man.

There were, from time to time, unseemly outbursts, exploding around him at random and breaking the numbing monotony. In his own way, he could stare down, and integrate, such scenes into his psyche, turning over the macabre behavior of his fellow inmates in his mind, sifting whatever information he found useful, storing that which was most interesting, and discarding whatever emotional stimuli the situation suggested.

A lanky, half-deaf pyromaniac named Dupree had occasion to go into the most abnormal fits, throwing himself to the floor, spitting and cursing, and, at times, making the noise of an animal. Typically, these scenes ended with

him being wrestled away, confined into a straight-jacket, and locked into a small cell until he managed to tire himself sufficiently to warrant release. It was during one such episode that he managed to upset his neighbor--a brooding, violent hulk named Douglass--to the point where he began to violently gesticulate; his huge, stinking, sweat slathered body twitching with a psychotic rage as he circled the trembling Dupree, his massive slabs of muscle tensed to the point of striking.

Suddenly, as if possessed of some new animalistic spirit hitherto unknown to him, Dupree leaped forward like a mangy cat, sinking his overgrown fingernails into the eyes of the much larger man, who began to wail, a sleek miasma of red running down his puffing cheek, giving the appearance of a despairing character at the culmination of some bloody Greek Tragedy.

Douglass immediately fell on top of Dupree, and the general ward seemed to quickly be enveloped with the excitement of this vulgar contest. Cots were suddenly overturned, aged crones that were never heard from began to cry out, and an intensely hyper-sexual deviant, who often spent his spare moments furiously abusing himself began to jump about excitedly, ripping off his garbs and rubbing himself vigorously in a lewd and shameful fashion.

Beneath his bare feet, a streamer of urine flowed downward, mixing with the little pools of blood and creating a hazardous slick on the stone floor.

Behind the gate of the Nurses Station, the slate-faced Sister of Mercy watched, chilled, as if she was seeing a pandemonium enacted by gorillas at a particularly ferocious wilderness enclosure. At the best of times, her face bore the stolid resignation of one who had seen every sort of unsavory display, and was indifferent to all of them. Tanzler watched as she picked up the phone, the deep bony contours of her face stretched into a rigid mask that looked incapable of speech, and quickly mumbled a few words. It was a moment before the heavy metal door at the end of the hall was thrown open, and a handful of attendants rushed in, swinging truncheons in every direction. One of them, losing his balance in the thin swamp of the floor, slipped, sprawling into a dwarfish stutterer whose incontinence forced him to wear the adult equivalent of an infant's diaper.

The cries and general commotion had swelled to a jungle-like din, and it was the work of several more men and nurses to put everything back into some semblance of steady order again.

While the unruly had been carted away, some to be strapped into a bed,

others a chair, and still others to lie in a surgery, the floor remained a foul soup, and it took several hours to goad a toothless, wild-haired old man named Chambers to gather an aged mop and bucket, and to fustily begin to apply some dirty water in a half-hearted and largely futile attempt to clean it. Of course, it drew its own small swarm of flies to light upon it, and buzz back and forth around the bald heads and sodden mattresses all lined up in a row.

Tanzler continued to wallow in the stink of his bunk, closing his mind to the smell, and closing his eyes to the world. Near his ear, he could hear the buzzing of a solitary insect as it stopped, for a bare moment, to perch on the lobe of his ear. As a sort of mental exercise, he contemplated thusly: *How does one manage to assume the consciousness of a fly?*

Dupree returned to the ward; Douglass did not.

He stumbled in like some shambling monster from a movie, his eyes even more vapid and empty than before, and a nice streamer of drool oozing its way down his bottom lip. His mouth seemed to hang in a slack, loosened manner, as if his bottom jaw had become permanently dislocated. The attendant led him to his familiar bunk, laid him down, and left him there, staring with cold dead eyes at the grey contours of his ceiling.

He never again caused another disturbance, but did require patient feeding. He was also apt, quite often, to soil himself, leaving an abominable stench in his wake in whatever area he managed, like a sleepwalker, to shuffle into. Mostly, however, he lay, like all the others, in a semi-state between wakefulness and slumber, feeling the ticking of the hours pass like the gradual drop of a heavy hammer on the soul.

Dr. Chalmers had spent the better part of the morning bending over his porcelain stool, vomiting copiously. He had come into the office rather late, still feeling the roiling surge of a bigger-than-average breakfast coursing through his stomach, and had settled himself down to pass time going through various and sundry files, ostensibly to update them.

His secretary had come in, then, to remind him of his meeting with Dr. Roscoe Jaffrey, a researcher who was doing interesting work with the application of electric shock. He looked up from his desk, regretted not taking a personal day, and said, "Of course. Oh, is that today, of all days? Well, what time did we set for that? Ten o'clock? Sure. Thank you, Josie."

He appraised her slyly as she walked back to the front office. Her legs looked as shapely and inviting as any he had ever before seen, and he prided himself on being an old hand at judging such matters. He would have to

make a note to become more friendly with her in the future.

She would, of course, reciprocate in kind.

Dr. Jaffrey had arrived fifteen minutes early, had impressed Dr. Chalmers as being a man who knew what he was talking about, even if certain idiosyncratic mannerisms he affected were, slightly, off-putting. He was small, fidgety, with a balding head, huge glasses, a skinny neck, deep set, baggy eyes that occasionally flared with a sort of wicked brilliance, and thick fish-like lips.

It was his nose, though, a massive beak-like structure that seemed as if it had been glued on his face at a Hollywood make-up studio, which was his crowning feature. It was prodigious, nearly abnormal, and to, crown it all, the man's suit was several sizes too large. Dr. Chalmers found him so privately amusing he nearly forgave his presence for several moments. On the whole, he put his best face on the meeting.

"Oh, it is really a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Chalmers. I've heard so much about you, read so many of your brilliant papers...It's just such a pleasure to be here with you today, to demonstrate what must, surely, become the revolutionary new method employed in the treatment of the incurably insane."

The man sniveled out his litany, his voice a high-pitched bouquet of inadvertent squeals and pops, and pressing both of his long, thin, abnormally large palms together, he peered at Dr. Chalmers over the tips of his long, tapering fingers, with a quivering gaze.

"Yes, well...I'm very happy to make your acquaintance, Doctor. Tell me: How long have you been performing these particular operations?"

Jaffrey grinned, a contortion of the face that did little to improve the quality of his physical looks. His teeth, noted Dr. Chalmers, were excessively tobacco-stained.

"Oh, my...well, I started at Willow Springs, as an assistant to Dr. Roy Alucard. Now he's a real sweetheart, don't let anyone tell you any different. And a genius in his field. I personally assisted in several dozen exploratory brain surgeries. Well, of course, you may have heard about the little tiff he had with the medical review board. A real shame about his license being revoked."

The little man bent over the desk, lowered his voice, as if both of them were seated in a crowded restaurant full of lurking spies, and nearly whispered, "You know, personally, I think they were jealous of his high success rate."

"Uh, I'm familiar with the case. Is this going to take long?"

Jaffrey suddenly burst into a corrosive peal of laughter, a kind of scraping, high-pitched ejaculation that oscillated at a numbingly slow frequency. It was rather like hearing nails scraped across a blackboard. Chalmers felt his head grow a little large.

“Oh, heavens no! It is actually a very simple procedure. I think that you will be impressed by the simplicity and cleanliness, not to mention the overall *effectiveness* of what we are about to demonstrate. But, if you’ll just excuse me for a moment--”

Shaking with the anticipation of a mischievous child. Jaffrey turned, went to the office door, stepped out for a moment, and brought back with him a large black case. He was followed by an immense Puerto Rican pushing an old fashioned wooden wheel chair, into which was strapped an elderly lady of indeterminable age.

“This is my personal valet, Rodrigo. Say hello to Dr. Chalmers, Rodrigo.”

“*Hola, Senor Doctor.*”, said Rodrigo, who was dressed in an entirely white smock, and looked to be a handsome, well-muscled lad of eighteen or twenty.

Jaffrey beamed.

“Isn’t he something? Been with me for years. And a faithful, hardworking man he is, too, just like all of his people. This--”

He gestured to the woman, who looked as if she weighted no more than ninety-five pounds, and barely ever stirred from her spot. She was, of course, strapped down into her chair.

--Is Jane. Jane has been good enough to volunteer herself for our demonstration today. She has presented herself as a very troubled case, in need of surgical correction, so the concurrence of our needs with hers is, shall we say, fortuitous. Is it not?”

“Indeed.”

Dr. Jaffrey carefully opened the black case at his side, placing it on the table, and flicking a hidden switch. Dr. Chalmers was certain he could hear an audible hum, but later thought that it might have been his imagination. Suddenly, the skin on his arms felt tingly.

Dr. Jaffrey pulled on a pair of white gloves, and carefully removed a curled ice pick from a container within the case. He looked at it a moment, placed it aside on the table, and then produced a vial of surgical alcohol from his coat, and laid it beside the pick. He uncoiled two wires, each bearing a single electrode at the end, and turning back to Dr. Chalmers, said, “First, a jolt of electric shock renders the patient docile and passive.”

Indeed, thought Dr. Chalmers, the patient looked as if she had already resigned herself to whatever barbarity Jaffrey had in store for her today. He folded his arms across his chest, leaned back, and then, nervous, sat forward in his chair suddenly, his fingers playing with themselves.

“Now, I just touch these, ever so briefly, to each temple...”

The woman jumped in her seat, more from fear, he supposed, than pain, for the jolt was over in a bare second. She looked, all of a sudden, as if she had been pounded in the head with a rubber mallet.

“Now, for the tricky part. This takes a considerable amount of skill. First, we take the instrument, ever so gently, in the operating hand. Then we move forward. The tip of the instrument is inserted beside the eye, like so...”

Chalmers leaned forward, his belly suddenly rumbling. Jaffrey looked like a little, intense skull perched on a thin, crooked branch of neck, but his eyes bulged with intense concentration and not the least little bit of excited satisfaction as he leaned forward, inserting the ice pick in Jane’s eye socket, expertly guiding the tip of the instrument into her frontal lobe.

His lips pulled back, and Chalmers saw the enormous yellowed teeth in all their revealed glory. Jaffrey looked, for all the world, like the demented offspring of the Mock Turtle and a common woodland ferret. Chalmers began to belch.

He noted that the ice pick was now penetrating into the brain of the lady, and, as quick as the experiment was (and it was over in the merest seconds) his own mind created a flashbulb image that would, he was certain, return to haunt him for many a sleepless night. Suddenly, he felt vomit hit the back of his throat, swallowed, got up hastily, said, “Uh, I’m going to have to...I mean, if you’ll excuse me”, and rushed past the tableaux, leaving the puzzled Jaffrey looking vaguely disappointed in him.

It was several hours later, after having rushed the strange trio out of his office with a few handshakes, and some noncommittal assurance that he would “certainly strongly consider the adoption” of the methods Dr. Jaffrey seemed to be so personally taken with, that he was finally able to get himself together. He sat behind his desk, sighed loudly, put his chin in his hand, and felt depressed. It was quite possible he was going to have to resort to something more radical to pick him up out of his growing funk.

It was sometime before four o’clock, the hour he usually reserved to cease and desist all mental activity, and prepare for the long drive home, when he decided, against all better judgment, to finally have a personal look at the

celebrity patient they had secreted away in the ward they reserved for acute cases. He realized, given the macabre routine that had been foisted upon him this morning, that it was, most likely, a bad idea. Still, as he flipped through the file he realized that he had been unconsciously avoiding this particularly unpleasant case, and he personally chastised himself for it. Well, today was as good a day as any.

He picked up the telephone, spoke for a moment, and then mentally prepared himself for dealing with the old skunk. Devising any sort of treatment plan for him was somewhat beyond his capability or inclination; after all, it was not the sort of situation even the best psychiatric mind could apply itself to, and ever hope to effect any real solution or cure. The very thought of what Mr. Tanzler had been up to for so very long, before his eventual discovery, was enough to make him feel nauseous, all over again.

Plus, he was made aware by several distressing missives from a prominent attorney that there were encroaching legal entanglements, and that did little to ease his mind or open up many options. At any rate, soon the door opened, and an orderly brought the man in, trailing behind him slowly and cautiously.

Tanzler gave the appearance of having, finally, been broken in the dim hallways of confinement. That was good; that was very, very good.

“Well, Mr. Tanzler, how have you been?”

The old man was seated in front of him unsurely, a miserable husk in a dirty dressing gown. His hair was disheveled, his nails had grown long, and heavy grey stubble dotted his drawn cheeks. He stared for a moment at Dr. Chalmers, as if unsure of how to proceed, opened his mouth as if to speak, licked his lips, and said nothing.

Chalmers continued to flip through the folder, taking a private stock of all the information. He said, “Yours is a serious case, Mr. Tanzler. Very serious, indeed, it would seem. Impersonating a physician, robbing graves, narcotics...as well as other lewd and unseemly acts. Tell me: Can you offer an explanation as to why you are here? Actually, first, can I get you to tell me your full name, for the record?”

The old man began slowly, his lips working before any sound even emerged. He said, “Don’t you already know my name, Doctor?”

Chalmers looked up, as if innocently hurt by the suggestion that he was merely playing a game.

“I need to know that you know your name. It’s just a formality.”

“Carl Tanzler.”

“Also, how old are you, presently?”

“I’m in my fifth incarnation.”

Chalmers looked up, seemed, for a moment, to not be able to register exactly what the answer he’d just been given meant, and then said, “I see...well, how about this incarnation? How old are you presently?”

“I’m forty-seven. And you already know that; it’s in my records.”

“Yes. I just needed to know if *you* knew it.”

Chalmers looked down, realized that this might be trying, flipped over the first page of the notebook, and looked apprehensively at the blank sheet before him.

He scratched something on a notepad, then said, “Very good. And, can you tell me why you were committed to this institution, Mr. Tanzler?”

“I haven’t the faintest.”

“I don’t, strictly speaking, think that you are being honest with me.”

Tanzler looked perturbed for a moment, narrowed his eyes, said, “You have all the answers you need, it seems, in that file in front of you. Why on earth do you need me to add anything?”

Chalmers looked down, as if to say, “You’re not at all being helpful”. and then said, “Well, you have been involved in quite a number of highly questionable and unethical practices. Also, some actions that you have taken are ...highly deviant, to be mild. Tell me: are you aware of the reason that the court has seen fit to commit you to our care here at Meadow Lane? Your actions have created a very hostile climate toward you, in your community.”

Tanzler seemed to finally begin to come to a semblance of life.

“I’m aware of my actions, and the reasoning behind them. What might strike you as abnormal is, to me, completely logical. You can, by no means, sit in judgment of me. Look at yourselves.”

Chalmers pursed his lips, said, “What do you mean by that statement?”

“Are you not conversant in English? I mean exactly what I said, exactly how it sounds. You, you’re all monsters, and you want to put me in hell forever. Because I loved too much, because I was able to take my love and keep it. While all of you just lock your love away. You bury it. In places like this.”

The color began to return to his pale, drained features, and Dr. Chalmers leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest in his habitual manner.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning. When did you first get the notion to engage in necrophilia?”

It was several minutes later, after having listened to the old man’s story, that he decided on a course of action. An intense, delusional psychosis, the

type of which was only responsive to extreme forms of shock therapy.

He said, "And so, these witches, or cultists you say, they taught you...what? How to bring the dead back to life? That is what you're telling me, yes?"

"Not exactly. As I mentioned, I have only the most minimal idea of the group, as to where it came from and its activities...I know only the young man, the young leader, who acted as the leader or priest of the cult. He gave me the secret, as it were, and I found that indeed the power could be mine to command."

Dr. Chalmers scribbled furiously, his mind racing. Tanzler was still speaking slowly, his voice occasionally rising upward in intensity, and then falling off again in a kind of somnolent rumble. The old man was clearly still heavily under the influence of a full-blown psychotic delusion. He doubted, very seriously, if he would ever see the light of day again.

He knew of only one alternative to lobotomy or electroshock, and it was far more preferable, especially in the case of someone like Tanzler, whose brain, such as it was, was still so finely developed. Of course, it made him sick to think of the mad old skunk making love to a corpse in the shadows of his old house. Beyond that, he felt no animosity toward him, and generally wished to help him to the best of his ability.

No, Tanzler was too fine a gent for the barbarities of Jaffrey's ice pick and electricity cure. The only other option was submersion in an ice bath; he had had tremendous results with that in certain cases, and perhaps the shock, he reckoned, would jolt the old man back into a sense of conventional reality. Of course, this case was so distinct that, when it came time to write his paper on it, he was damned to even guess where he would begin.

"Thank you, Doctor. That will be all for today. I...I think I have all the information I need, for now..."

Part 4

And all with pearl and ruby glowing
Was the fair palace-door,
Through which came, flowing, flowing, flowing,
And sparkling evermore,
A troop of Echoes, whose sweet duty
Was but to sing

In voices of surpassing beauty
The wit and wisdom of their king. --Edgar Allen Poe

The days swam out into an endless succession of experiences that he was forced to endure, merely because his body was present to endure them. His mind had sealed itself inside, and he began to become insensate to everything around him. It was like, after many months, he had begun to simply exist in the secret spaces of his own skull.

A regimen of hydrotherapy baths was prescribed by the somewhat baffled Dr. Chalmers, who must have felt, by this point, that nothing he resorted to would manage to make a dent in the strange case of Carl Tanzler. The man was a veritable cypher, and he planned at the first opportunity to write a spectacular paper concerning the particularities of this singular case. As for the man himself, Chalmers reasoned that he was as comfortable as was allowed a patient confined in this asylum. Whether he enjoyed his stay or not was of no importance whatsoever. His indifference, true, was troubling, but it was hardly unnatural and he had seen it before, in other intelligent men who found themselves in the unhappy circumstance of being submitted here for psychiatric housing. It was part and par for the course, even for a patient as psychologically aberrant as Tanzler.

Of course, the man himself had no idea what was going to occur at the first of the baths, but was simply let from the ward, as meek and docile as a lamb, to the room where the special treatment was administered. Once there, he was stripped of his clothing and lowered into the dry tub, to await the oncoming rushing flow of the freezing water. It was believed, when first this particular treatment was introduced, that the physical shock of being submerged in the icy water would serve to heighten the lucid awareness of even the most aberrant patients, causing them to shake off their neurosis and psychopathy, and think in a more reasonable and acceptable state. As far as Tanzler was concerned, there was no evidence that this was having any additional effect on him, whatsoever. However, stopping just short of the sickening spectacle of a frontal lobotomy, Dr. Chalmers felt that his hands were tied.

A regimen of insulin had been administered forthwith, also with not much in the way of any demonstrable success, except having made the old man excruciatingly ill for a prolonged period. Seeing the futility of this, after conversing at length with a patient who, though now subdued and largely unresponsive, was quite clearly still possessed of a terrible dementia, Dr. Chalmers halted the injections at once, fearing also for the physical

stability of his patient.

Why, he thought to himself on second consideration, had he believed that the cold water immersions would be any less physically strenuous, was something he now could not explain to his own conscious with any sense of satisfaction. Yet, Tanzler did, indeed, seem to be undergoing an important shift, the dawning of a strange, new awareness, that Dr. Chalmers feared could only be another permutation of his mental sickness. There was still, he considered over coffee and bourbon one evening, sitting in front of the crackling fireplace in his home, so much to be divined from this singular case.

The first of the therapy baths had been sprung on him quite by surprise. Tanzler had been reclining in a chair in his own private corner when a tall, grim orderly dressed all in white came for him, leading him quietly out the locked gate and the double door, and through an interminable hallway that seemed to be stark white stretching out toward infinity. Tanzler followed just a little behind him, shuffling slowly, occasionally feeling a not unkind tug on the sleeve of his gown.

The room smelt of stagnant water, and the incessant drip of leaking pipes might have been enough to send some of the men treated here over the edge, depending on their proclivity toward obsessive registering of minutia in the surrounding environment. One wall was conveniently mirrored, and Tanzler guessed, in a quick, shooting moment of thought, that this was most assuredly a two-way device, made especially for curious researchers to observe unobtrusively.

He stripped slowly, with a little help, not liking for a moment the flabby whiteness of his sedentary body. He looked quite ghastly, he reflected for a fleeting moment, and then he pushed the thought from his mind. It was surprisingly warm in here, and he was thankful for the consideration paid by the staff on this one particular point. It was warm, and had the faint odor of a gymnasium sauna or shower. He was lowered into the tub.

The first flood of icy water hit him like an electric jolt, sending his mind racing outward into an ecstasy that was not exactly pain, but was very far removed from pleasure. He felt the cold grip him, surround him, as the water began to flood in from the hose-like structure at the rim.

He felt his mind washed as clean as if his consciousness had been sprayed with a high, corrosive acid, and he felt himself begin to blackout. Or rather, he could only dimly remember later, it had been more of a “white out” to be perfectly precise, for it was if he was staring into a vortex of

blowing soap flakes, behind which a powerful searchlight was poised like a sort of science fictional death ray. His hearing began to fill with the powerful drone of a godlike yawning and he felt himself, suddenly, relieved of the burdens of so many years passed.

His feet had been placed on the pathway to somewhere, and he was shocked, at first, to realize that he was clear of the tub, and walking down the corridor again, although this time, the whiteness of it was so intense as to suggest the pathway joining the end of life to the beginning of death. Beside him, the orderly, a black man that now seemed to stand a hundred feet tall, said, "We're going to have to get you back, Doc. Time is up, for now."

He looked down at his own body, saying nothing, but realized suddenly, that he was naked. The thought did not in the least alarm him, nor did he sense the sort of sensations that a naked man might associate with any slight extreme in the temperature of a drafty corridor. No, even his legs and arms had ceased to trouble him with minor aches and pains, and he felt a curious, floating weightlessness that suggested that the world had suddenly been revealed to be made of heavy liquid.

"Say, boy, I'm not dead, am I?"

He asked the question with only a hint of subtle curiosity and no fear. The black man smiled back at him with teeth that were huge, white, and seemed capable, under the right circumstances, of chopping a man in half.

"Not at all Doc. In fact, you could say that you are on your way to a very important meeting. Follow me, please."

"Is it Chalmers? Will I have to meet with that slovenly young dolt again, today of all days? And so soon after my bath?"

The black man said nothing, but stopped at a seeming dead end, reached into the whiteness of the wall, and opened a door. It revealed a thin, rectangular opening of solid black, contrasting against the whiteness surrounding it as if it was simply a flat velvet curtain of darkest midnight.

"Follow me, please."

The orderly strode inside, his features instantly devoured by the surrounding dark, until all that Tanzler could see of him was his white uniform, moving against the blackness ahead as if it was standing and walking about on its own. Tanzler felt himself began to trail, and the walking white uniform began to grow smaller and smaller in the distance until at last, he found himself alone.

He began to remember a film he had seen once of underwater research in the Pacific Ocean; of a great, sleek shark moving about like a

silent predator in the waters. He fancied he could see the sharp incurving rows of razor-like teeth set against the abominable delta shape of the recessed mouth. His mind, like some mad microscopic instrument, began to zero in on the minutia of this amazing creature, which transformed, suddenly, into a freak show representation of various and sundry forms of aquatic life.

He found that he was laying in a bubbling stream, surrounded by algae and ensconced upon a bed of glistening smooth pebbles, while tiny fish, and tinier tadpoles raced around him in the whirling motion-driven hum and thrull of water life.

He imagined he might have been transformed, suddenly, into a crab, or even a clam, and the idea so horrified him that he grasped with his brain to remember where he truly was.

Wherever he was, it was not in the gleaming green and blue of a babbling brook, and he was no clam, for he was treading darkness, terrified now. Ahead, he thought he could see a glimmer that might be the white uniform of his vanishing orderly, or might not. He sped ahead with the full force he could muster, watching as the shifting pattern of light (it did, in fact, look like the mild reflection off of a pool of glistening water) began to emerge from the black, giving a luminescence that was at once both unearthly and utterly wonderful. He followed the easy, shifting patterns of aquatic light out of the dark, until, gradually, he found himself in what, at first, appeared to him to be a large airplane hanger.

He quickly amended this; it must in fact, he immediately decided, be some sort of gymnasium, or arena. There were bleachers lining the walls, and thousands of people were there, seated. Suddenly, as he entered the dim confines, and began to move out onto the spacious floor, he heard a gradual wave of cheering and stamping, clapping and uproar, as a spotlight beam encircled him, and he heard a commentator begin to echo out over the loudspeaker: "And here we have him, direct from the shrieking hallways of the institute for the criminally insane, the one, the only mad genius of our times, Dr. Otto Carl Tanzler!"

The applause rose like a thunderous roll of cannon fire, and Tanzler suddenly felt foolish and wildly ashamed of what he knew must be his shabby, unkempt appearance. He realized he must look, for the moment, like a shabby, doddering old fool in pajamas, and he wondered that there seemed to be no laughter erupting from the huge audience. He blinked back the lights, as a woman approached him with the grace of a ballerina, put a microphone in front of him, and then, smiling, seemed to retreat,

expectantly.

He stood looking at the microphone glumly, poked it with a finger, heard a titanic thump that told him it was live, and then lost the nerve to do anything else. Suddenly, a man that had been standing near at hand, a man that was dressed, resplendently, in a tailor-made suit and expensive hat, stepped forward from the gloom, and bending to him, whispered, "Sir, your people are waiting."

"Waiting? What in the hell for?"

The man looked generally perplexed. Tanzler was shocked to see just how incredibly thin and regal his dark looks were. Also, his eyes were piercing black, with no color in them at all.

"For you to address them, Sir. Concerning your latest discovery."

"My latest discovery? And what, pray tell, would that be?"

Suddenly the man stepped beside him, held out a hand, and Tanzler followed the general direction of his motion. In the center of the immense arena floor, suddenly, massive lights came on, revealing a sight so strange as to be almost astounding.

It was the skeleton of some sort of immense ship, and it was being worked over by a construction crew of large, bullish women dressed exactly like convicts. In fact, for all he knew, they might actually be convicts, but if they were not, then they were most certainly slaves, as they were shackled together, every one, and he was amazed as the man led him over by the hand, to see one of them, a large woman that somehow looked familiar, stand, clutch her breast, and apparently keel over dead. This elicited no response from her fellow workers, and whatever they did with the body was unknown to him, but as he stood there, he turned to the well-dressed man and realized, damn it, that he would probably never have a decent explanation for this.

"They're building your airship, doctor. It will fly you high, up above the clouds, and into the upper stratosphere. There, you and your beloved Rose will be bathed in the light of the cosmic rays. These, and only these will restore her to her former life and beauty. Isn't that right, audience?"

And the man had turned, raising his arm in the air as if to say, "You can clap now." Wild applause erupted through the stadium, as feet began to stamp bleachers, making a titanic noise. Suddenly, through windows situated high up, Tanzler thought he could see a flash of light.

"What was that?" he implored, nervously.

"That was the cosmic rays of which we are even now speaking. Wait."

The man suddenly grew very still, holding his cupped hand to his ear.

Tanzler began to feel the skin on his arms prickle, and an icy wind suddenly began to blow up, from nowhere. He whirled.

Behind him, the incomplete frame of the airship now seemed like the bleached bones of some huge whale that had been washed up on a beach a thousand years ago to desiccate and dry out in the sun, until all that was left was some gigantic ribcage.

A great murmur of noise began to ripple through the assembled audience, until finally, people began to pour off of the bleachers, stampeding and crushing each other as they went. The building had instantly grown alive with panic, and Tanzler could not in the least divine why.

Suddenly, as if in answer, a mammoth wave of force seemed to slam against the side of the building, sending the floor rumbling beneath their feet. It sounded like the place was going to be torn to shreds.

“Hurry! We’ve got to get out of here! The cosmic rays! My God! They’re coming for us, and we aren’t even prepared!”

The tall, well-dressed man suddenly disappeared in a comic run, as Tanzler stood, his fingers in his mouth, feeling his eyes begin to bulge as he stared up at the deep, cavernous ceiling.

An enormous crack was spreading there, whatever force causing it being strong enough to rip the two edges of the ceiling apart as if they were paper.

A stream of the most incredible light he had ever seen, far brighter and more substantial than sunlight, poured down upon him. It was a strange, fiery light, with swirling bursts of flame in the solid beam, and it burned his face as he reeled back in terror. But it was not heat that singed his skin: it was deep, burning cold, that felt like torturous ice.

Suddenly, he was struggling upward through waves of blackness, back to consciousness, numbly, his heart racing as he pulled against his bonds, immersed deep within the icy waters of the hydrotherapy tub.

He was led back to the ward in shock, shuffling like an old man. His eyes seemed to search the dim corners of the room, still, for some glimpse of the hypnotic, fiery light.

Part 5

But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
Assailed the monarch's high estate.
(Ah, let us mourn--for never morrow

Shall dawn upon him desolate!)
And round about his house of glory
That blushed and bloomed
Is but a dim-remembered story
Of the old time entombed. --Edgar Allen Poe

He walked across the street, as if a voyager cast from the shores of some bitter dream, and looked up at his faithful old residence again. It seemed, outlined against the grey of an autumn sky, as if it had stood like the sentinel of his being while he had been confined to the halls of madness and pain. He clacked across the street.

His attorney had seen to all his affairs in the interim, and the house remained in his keeping, as securely as any tranquil harbor offered protection after so strange a sudden storm.

The windows were boarded up, and the paint was peeling, and he later discovered some graffiti and other vandalism had been enacted on the surface of his old home. On the whole, though, it was as he had last seen it. Walking across the street, mounting the stone steps, and walking through the overgrown yard to his own front door, he realized how incredibly lucky he was to ever be seeing it again.

He fished for a moment in his pocket, took out his key, inserted it, not liking the rusty grate of the rattling old lock, but knowing deep inside that this was the house's way of greeting him again after such a long absence. Nearly a year it had been pawed over, brooded over, avoided, vandalized, whispered about, and finally left to molder. But he was home now, and all would be different.

He swung the front door wide, the gloom and must meeting his nostrils, but not having much of an effect now. He had been through too much.

He went inside, his eyes gradually adjusting to the light, and he tried the switch. Mercifully, the lights came on, revealing what had once been the outer office of his own private practice. All that was gone now, of course, and the desk where, once, had rested the plump posterior of the enigmatic Imelda, was covered in a fine, thick dust, as was all the other seats and tables. He walked into the main foyer, the electric light trailing, casting his shadow long into the gloom, and looked up at the old staircase, the heavy banister reaching up to the heavy darkness where, once (it now seemed an aeon ago) he had been a man with secrets, and visions. He felt the cool, dark pulse of the house settle deep into his aged bones. Where to begin?

He set down his suitcase, went into the various rooms, even turned on

the radio for a little company. He inspected the bare cupboards, the ice box, the cabinets. All the liquor was gone; there was no food, and a few valuables were missing.

Of course, his own private supply of pharmaceuticals had long since been consigned to the vanishing hole of oblivion. He sighed, lit a cigarette, and found an ancient box of tea. He set some water to boil, retrieved a cup, and retired, for a few moments, to the relative sanctity of his former office.

The artificial company of the radio echoed throughout the dull stillness of the house, as he sipped at his cup, letting the images of a former life play in the reflective mirror of his awakening memories.

How many of them were true? Weren't they all true, to him at the very least?

Was he really cured? Had he managed to exorcise his ghosts? Whose game was he playing?

His mind was still split into those faculties which had assured his eventual recovery. He had spent months stuffing yesterday into a hole, trying as best as he could to cast a thick fog about his recent past, to try and accept, at least to a degree, the vision of reality that was considered to be normal by the vast hum and thrull of people on the street. They had spent months pounding their own reality into him, supplanting his, chilling him to the bones with their vision of normalcy. At first, he went along out of a desire to simply be free; finally, they had managed to almost entirely convince him.

Still, there was a niggling feeling in the base of his skull, a sense that a man could stuff so much into that hole marked "forbidden", and still have some of the refugees hiding there make odd appearances; haunt him, as it were. He sat at his desk, feeling the cold energy seep into his bones, trying, as best he could, to keep black thoughts at bay.

He got up, got his tea, and walked around a bit downstairs, to get the feel of the place again. It seemed old beyond even his years, and he reflected that this was just about right. Everything connected to him was old, decrepit, falling to pieces.

He could see figures moving in the gloom, faintly. He rubbed his eyes. The stigmatism was getting worse, and he was certain that, in a short time, he would be forced to wear glasses permanently. He thought one of the swirling shades looked like Imelda, come to serve him coffee, get the paper, talk to him about today's appointments. He laughed bitterly. He was the last thing, he was quite certain, on that particular woman's mind.

He knew, could feel, that he was avoiding going upstairs. Yet, if he was

to continue some semblance of his life here, he would be forced, sooner or later, to deal with the shades of the past. He stood at the foot of the dusty staircase, staring up into the gloom, a slant of sunlight doing little to brighten the deep grey murk as it fell, like a hot knife, down the carpeted steps. He put his hand on the banister, pulled back a palm full of dust, wiped it off on his jacket, and felt his foot hit the first step with the predictable squeak.

Slowly he went up, telling himself that it would be alright, that he was cured now (whatever the hell that particular term was supposed to mean), and saying to himself, "It's just a house...Just my old house. Neglected, abused, spat upon...I'm sorry my precious. I'll not leave you again, so soon. I paid for you, and what you buy in this world, you keep. You're just a ...a comfortable old shoe..."

No, you're a peepshow of ghosts, is what you are. A dumb play of a past that lingers, like acid in my stomach; a past I must forget if ever there is to be hope, once again, of attaining anything amounting to sanity. Damn me for a fool, I should never have come back here.

He tried to brush the thoughts from his mind with a groping, stiffened hand, feeling his cool, raspy fingers trail along the greasy slickness of his unwashed, thinning hair. At the head of the stairs, he stopped for a moment, staring into that well of blackness that led from the front hallway back, to his old workshop. To the place where he had melted the wax, cut the strips of silk, and fashioned from old bones a semblance of life.

But it was just a semblance. The rest of it, what I can even remember of it, was only an illusion, fashioned from the dissociated bits of my subconscious neurosis. Pity the mind is as unreliable as it is. Otherwise, I would have been a brilliant man.

The sun was setting, its heavy red sphere streaking the world outside with orange and yellow stripes. These brilliant, beautiful colors illuminated the spaces between doorways, and shined dully behind the drapes, yet nothing, it would seem, could penetrate the gloom of this upstairs area. He felt his skin cool perceptibly, to the point of chilling, and put his hand out to push the bedroom door.

It opened with a rusty squeal, slowly revealing itself to him, and he was not surprised, owing to the location of the room, to find the power of the setting sun was bolder, more pronounced here, of all places. He blinked, inhaled a fine dust, and stepped across the threshold, to look again at what remained.

There was the canopy bed. There were his dresser and wash tub, his

Wurlitzer electric organ, and finally, his pictures. What remained of them.

All of the pictures of Rose were gone. He supposed the Steinmetz family had asked the police that they be returned. So too, his occult bric-a-brac, with the exception of a lonely rosary and a few candles, the images of Christ and the saints staring outward, in their divinity, to the stifling murk of his dust-choked boudoir.

He walked around to the foot of the bed, closed his eyes. He half-imagined he could see her lying there, her arms folded across her chest, the heavy reconstruction of silk and wax masking the sepulchral image beneath; the glass eye staring, in an idiotic reverie of artificial beauty, at the darkness of his form behind the canopy curtain. Wherever she was now, did her hair still fall as lovely as it had when it was laid out on the pillow? She had, he knew, finally been consigned to be food for worms.

He parted the veil. No, there was nothing there now, where she had lain. He fancied he could see the faint indentation where she had rested for so long, in the sagging contours of the mattress. But his eyes were deceiving him, he knew.

He looked at the bedside table. Dust, a broken item that had probably been smashed to bits by some clumsy oaf of a policeman, little else; he had lost many valuables in his long, strange sojourn.

He looked at the mattress, when, suddenly, his eyes trailed to a dull gleam secreted behind the headboard of the bed. Perhaps it was the strange way in which the sunlight struck it, but it gave him a momentary thrill to realize that they had accidentally knocked something out of sight in their search. He bent low, resting his hand on the bed, shakily, hearing his knees pop like twin pistons. He fished for a moment in the crack between bed and nightstand, finally managing (with much huffing and puffing) to pull the dust covered square of glass out from behind where it had fallen.

It was a picture portrait.

It took a moment for the image to register.

He felt a surge of hate and sorrow flow through him.

He immediately threw it with all his remaining strength against the far wall of the bedroom, hearing the dusty glass smash to fragments, while bitter tears welled up in his eyes. He put his face in the crook of his arm, collapsed on his old bed, hearing the rusty springs squeak in his ears. He cried, viciously, for a few moments, realizing that here, in total solitude, tears were acceptable and called for.

“Oh Rose, Rose...forgive me! How I’ve failed you.”

He began to repeat these words, mantra-like, his mouth drying to thick,

mucous-like cotton, the words echoing emptily off the wall of his violated home. He wept until there were no more tears, until his body ventured upon exhaustion, and, for a merciful short time, he managed to sleep.

He awoke in the darkness, not, at first, even realizing where he was. His head ached a little, and he stumbled upward from the mattress, feeling himself come back from waves of unconsciousness, to a renewed semblance of the waking world of midnight.

He knew, quite badly, that he wanted alcohol, and he prepared himself to go out and obtain it. He would bring it back, and, in the darkness, drink himself into a stupor where the ghosts of yesterday could no longer touch him. He knew, deep inside himself, that this could become routine, if he was not careful.

The moonlight was streaming through the window, and, hypnotized by the swirls of dust he saw there, he went to it for a moment, looking out at the cold, unforgiving night. The stars were twinkling in vast array, and the moon was as full, and as entrancing, as he had ever known it to be. He imagined in this dust, these small, nearly microscopic fibers, he could find, once again, a trace of the life that was lost to him. A way to regain the spirit and soul that now were as cold and frozen as ice.

“Perhaps,” he said to himself, “It is the power of the cosmic rays, after all.”

He spoke a snatch of a poem he had read once, that went: “...from a wild, weird clime, that lieth sublime. Out of Space. Out of Time.”

He couldn't remember who had penned those lines, but he had always loved them. The air cooled the flesh on his skin, and he felt himself growing powerful, in a sense, in the glow from that accursed moon. He knew he was a free man once more, and that, in the dark and secret moments between sunset and sunrise, he could perforce regain some of the power he had had so unceremoniously ripped from him for what seemed an eternity now. He listened for a tremor of the beating heart, the pulsing energy of the old domicile, and wondered as the shadows swirled around his being, if there was ever any hope or reawakening the spirit vortex of energy he had once been command of.

And, because he felt not the faintest whiff of a vibration course through his shadow-shrouded feet, he went downstairs, out the door, to obtain a bottle of spirits.

Later, as he brooded in the night, lifting the bottle to his lips in the stifling dark, he planned, and prodded, and hoped for an answer. Yet, as drunk as he became, the ghosts were still there, after all.

Donald Baumgartner sat in front of his typewriter, his ashtray flowing over with cigarettes, and a bottle of cheap hooch half empty in front of him. His desk was littered with crumpled balls of paper, news clippings, the remains of a take-out dinner moldering in several white cartons, and a stack of pulp magazines he collected. Some of them featured stories under his byline, and a half-dozen others, and other magazines were fresh prospects plucked from the racks of the local drugstores.

When he wasn't being paid to snoop, he made what he could writing detective stories. Some, pulled from his own file of exploits, were ripping first-hand accounts; others were simply his own fictions, the enthusiasts version of "tall tales". Still others reflected an uncanny mind for research on the various macabre facets of history, detection, and crime. Not a one of them was as popular as the feature he had sold to *Thrilling Tales of Mystery and Detection*. That particular case study had netted him a pile of fan letters, and a generous contract to develop the thing into a full-length book. The advance had been generous, and his editor, Hugh McCracken, had sounded as chipper as he had ever heard him sound, the last time he had called. It was, really, shaping up to be a four-star year for Donald Baumgartner. And who could tell what the future might hold?

He had been sitting at the typewriter now for an unprecedented four hours, however, and so far, he had about twenty pages of mediocre material. He could feel his energy and enthusiasm flag a little.

Was it that he felt daunted by the sheer size of such an undertaking? His longest piece, to date, had been twelve thousand tightly compacted words, and that had taken the better part of a week. He had felt good and tight during that period, like an unstoppable express train of literary invention, and he had been selling stories like they were penny candy. Also, his regular workload of spying on cheating husbands, insurance frauds, and running up against the occasional true-blue psychotic, had slackened considerably, allowing him time to hone his sparse, minimalist style of prose to a white hot razor point. Owing to the burgeoning success of one career, he had found himself unconcerned about the flagging nature of his other career. He hated to do it, but if his writing really took off, he knew he would consider closing the office, hanging up his gun, and dismissing his secretary and operatives with impeccable references and a fond, protracted farewell party. He was tired of wearing out shoe leather, receiving hate-filled letters, and being shot at. Let some young punk take up where he left off.

As he typed, his fingers feeling as if they had suddenly grown into stiff

sticks of lead, his mind continued to wander to the streets outside; the passing blare of a radio, the honk of a few lonely horns, and the sputtering neon sign outside that cast a rose colored reflection against the wall. He thought he could hear a train rumble closing in from the distance, and, outside, some drunk strumpet let up a yell, a cackle, and had her voice drowned out by the harsh bark of her paramour, probably a soldier on leave. He got up for a moment, looked down into the street, saw the two of them framed in the glow of the street lights. He was half right: her boyfriend was a sailor.

She weaved her drunken way through a few passing cars, eliciting a cavalcade of horn blasts, and made her way to the opposite end of the street below. Her boyfriend caught up with her, grabbed her arm, looked as if he was about to belt her, melted into her arms, and the two exchanged a kiss before going off, arm and arm, up the sidewalk and into the darkness. He tried to follow them with his eyes but lost them as they turned the corner down the walk. Snooping, he reflected, came as naturally and reflexively now as breathing.

He made a mental image of the woman: cheap and trashy, dressed like a Hollywood call-girl, her sweater too tight, her bra stuffed with socks, her long legs clacking in black heels and silk hose, her skirt just the proper length to throw caution to the winds of delicacy and decency. Her hair was perfect, her face no doubt, was thick with powder, rouge, and lipstick. Hair was solid black, and, on top of her pretty head, there was a strange, shiny little hat that looked as if it had been pinned into place. Like a beret.

He stuffed this away in a mental file, for reasons he wasn't even sure of, and realized he was good at what he did.

He then sighed, went to his desk, lit a cigarette, and sat back, rubbing his eyes and staring at the infernal machine as it sat in front of him in mocking silence, ridiculing his current bout with writer's block.

"My God, what am I going to do with you?"

The typewriter remained smugly silent, as if to say, "Not a thing, jack. You're all washed up. You were a real shmuck to ever think you could pull off the writer bit. Go back to burning up the shoe leather. You're a washout."

He suddenly said, out loud, "Fuck you." And then he went to the wall, pulled down the bed, and climbed on top, resting his head on his folded arms, and puffing away.

"Smoking in bed is a bad idea, my friend," he said, to the four walls and the darkness. "You'll end up in some homicide dick's private collection of

death photos.” He could see the headline now: DETECTIVE DIES IN APARTMENT BLAZE.

Or, perhaps it would scream: WRITER PERISHES IN FIERY MISHAP.

Or, maybe it wouldn’t make the papers at all.

He continued to lay there, and puff, at odds with his own faculty of imagination. It wasn’t that he didn’t have all the pertinent facts down straight (what he could glean of them, at least), he had more than enough to start, and he even had a couple of short interviews with that Doctor, Chalmers, to work in the psychological angle. He had interviews with anonymous staff members at the loony bin where old Tanzler had spent the last year. In truth, he had more than enough to start off with, including his own small part in the larger events. So what was the problem?

He reached over, stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on the nightstand, and knew, somehow, that he needed more. That his pounding of the pavement in Marion wasn’t yet completed, and that there were too many loose ends, and something nagging at him to boot. He looked at the half-used sheet of paper still in the typewriter. It read, in part:

“...In all my many years as a private detective, hitting the pavement in search of clues concerning any number of bizarre, mystifying crimes, no case that has ever come across my desk has ever caused the ripples of sensation and fear that I experienced while digging deeply into the bizarre, macabre life of the necrophile, Dr. Carl Tanzler...”

He suddenly pulled the paper from the typewriter, crumpled it in disgust, and pitched it into the wire wastebasket with a small mound of others that he had slowly accrued this evening. It was pretty turgid stuff, really, and he didn’t have anything better in mind at the moment.

He started to turn away from his desk, rapped his knuckles speculatively on the wood, and then picked up the half-folded piece of news clipping he had been pondering on earlier in the evening. He quickly ran his eyes down the column of small print for the fourth time:

“...Residents in a small Indiana town are protesting the early release of an infamous grave robber from Meadow Lane State Hospital. Dr. Carl Tanzler, 46, was declared unfit to stand trial last year for various crimes, not the least of which was having stolen the body of a young woman later identified as Rosabelle Steinmetz, also of Marion...”

He folded the news clipping, considered his options for a moment, and then rubbed his eyes, went to put on his shirt, a tie, and got his hat and jacket. He stopped for a moment, looked in the filmy mirror above the washstand, and then reached down to collect a pocketful of spare change, half a pack of cigarettes, and take his gun out from the top drawer of his desk.

He went downstairs and stood on the corner a moment, as if to decide which course of action would be best to take within the next two hours. His mind was a jumble of facts and fancies, and everything seemed to zero in on the looming deadline.

He went down a half a block to the corner drugstore, bought a cheese sandwich, and sat at the counter, munching over a tepid cup of coffee. A few stragglers popped in and out, an old stumblebum sat in a booth behind him, looking as if he was trying to salvage what was left of his energy in order to get up, walk out, and move down the alley to destinations Donald Baumgartner only guessed at.

He would go back to Marion. Not tonight, maybe not tomorrow night, but soon. The thought did little to please him.

“Quitting time!”

He was pulled, for a moment, out of the quiet fog that he usually operated under, and looked down at the overly enthusiastic face of Rocky Olsen, as he broke into a smile, took off his cap, wiped his forehead with one swarthy little hand, and said, “Hey, you want to join me and the boys for a cold one?”

At first, he didn’t know how to reply, but, because he needed to hold onto this job for a little while longer, he forced himself to nod, slowly, and slightly grin.

“Sure thing, Rock. You lead the way.”

The men joined the line at the time-clock, each hurriedly punching out, grabbing whatever they had brought with them to the factory floor that morning, and walking back out through the front offices, passing second shift workers on their way out. The men looked rugged, unshaven, and their faces bore the individual roadmap of years of grueling labor at a low paying factory job, whose long hours were punctuated with incipient alcoholism and a steady diet of vended food and bitter coffee. Would he end up one of these sagging hulks?, he wondered to himself. Already, he could feel a sort of apathetic weariness steal over him, as if he had come to the end of his prospects, and not the beginning of them.

He figured you could stay in a place like this twenty years, floating back and forth between one crummy job or another, and after awhile you would be as chewed up as if you had been caught in the giant jaws of an industrial grinder. It was a slow process, but once you hit the point of no return--bad back, missing teeth, balding head and a pot belly--you had just about found yourself the rigid groove that would take you from here to the front porch of a beat-up little shack with a leaky roof. You might spend ten years as a broken old man, rotting away on the front porch of such a dump, before the Good Lord saw fit to put your fading lights out.

He walked past the front office, saw one of the suits who ran the place leaned over the secretaries desk. He looked, despite his fancy attire, like a cheap hustling rube with a little smarts. Enough to get him off the factory floor, and behind a desk, where he could pretend (at least to himself) that he was The Man. That he had, really, achieved something special.

He dreaded going to the bar, hated the idea of joining in any of the stupid ribaldry, boring conversations, or back-slapping bonhomie. Truthfully, he hated the taste of beer, and the thought of sitting in the dank, smelly, smoke-filled room seemed about as soothing to him as wiping his ass with sandpaper.

However, if you gave up a night, went drinking with them, it made it easier to work with them. And he could sit in a corner, half-in and half-out of the happenings around him, and continue to brood and ponder. He didn't have to be a part of their world, not if he didn't want to.

The bar was a down at the heels little dive at the end of a dirt alley, just off the parking lot. It didn't really have a name, except the word "Bar" on a battered sign hung out front above the door. It could have been mistaken, from the street, for an outsized tool shed.

Next to it, a condemned house, its porch littered with a mass of refuse and junk, squatted in gray, mournful neglect. Behind, a chain-link fence bordered an overgrown lot, ringed by drooping barbed wire. An enormous industrial drum rusted like some misbegotten hulk from a faraway planet, rimmed by a straggling chorus of tangled weeds. Beyond this, a few houses rested on the incline of a hill, next to the railroad tracks.

The bar was loud with conversation, warbling country music jumping from an old record player, and the squealing boards grinding beneath the combined weight of tired, burly men and their worn boots. He took a seat, nodded at the bartender, and ordered a beer, surprised at how well the brew wet down, soothing his parched throat and actually relaxing him a hair. Next

to him, his little buddy Rocky was jabbering a hundred miles a minute, talking about the Brooklyn Dodgers, his aching feet, his hernia operation, his wife Marge, how good the beer tasted. Behind them, a few gents crowded around the pool table, setting forth an occasional clack of balls thumping into holes. He didn't, all of a sudden, want to be here.

"Hey, relax chief, were here to have a good time. Hey Artie, get another beer for my friend here. He looks like he's still thirsty. Hey, you know Artie? This guy here is a living legend among bartenders. He never met a bottle he couldn't drop. Ain't that right, Artie?"

"Sure enough, Rock. Hey, buddy, you look like you been down a mile or two of rough road. What, you got some dame keeping you up nights?"

Both of the men started laughing, the gruff bartender popping the cap off of the bottle with one deft move of his huge, meaty hand. He was enormously fat, with slicked-back, greasy black hair, a faded white shirt, and to top it all with a touch of merriment, a tie. But his eyes were sharp, and his brows arched in such a way as to suggest a sort of malicious cunning. Beside him, Rocky, his skinny arm pitched up on the bar, his dirty fingers dangling off into space, leaned over, said something under his breath that only the barkeep caught, and then began guffawing like a hyena. Rocky half-turned on the stool looked at him, as if considering just what type of a fellow he might really be, and asked, "Well, do you concur with our observation, old bean?"

He had no idea what Rocky was talking about at this point, but he half-smiled, looked at him, and said, "Sure."

This brought another hysterical guffaw from Rocky, who suddenly slapped the bar with his hand, and said, "See, I told you Art! He's a real nickel!"

Artie wiped the counter absentmindedly, shook his head, laughed, and , throwing his rag over one shoulder, turned to walk in the back. Rocky leaned over, patted him on the shoulder, and proceeded to drink himself into a stupor.

It was several hours later, and the beer had given him a slight headache. Rocky had already departed, taking all five feet three inches of himself home to his wife, who would yell at him until he slapped her a good one and ambled off to bed to pass out. Rocky would wake up one morning in the not too distant future to find himself alone, his wife and kid having disappeared in the night with a good portion of the money he had secreted away in an old sock under a loose floorboard. It would not be long after that Rocky ate the barrel of an old hunting rifle one morning while pulling, mighty early in

the day, from a bottle of cheap hooch. These events, however, were still several years in the future.

By the time the bar had nearly emptied out, all that remained were a few straggling drunks, and himself. And he was not so much drunk as he was simply too tired to make the trek home, presently. What the hell, he thought to himself. He loved the night.

A tired looking woman, holding a purse and smoking a cigarette, ambled in just before closing. He at first thought this was strange, and then decided she must be a whore. Sure enough, she slowly sauntered to the bar, looking sideways at the assembled drunks, and sat on the empty stool next to him.

Sizing up her prospects, he thought. Suddenly, Artie approached them, said, "Hey, friend. You been nursing that beer bottle for almost two hours now. Now, I don't mind you sitting in here, seeing as how we're getting ready to close up shop, anyhow. Next time, though, you're gonna have to buy more than a couple of beers if you want to sit in here all night."

Artie looked like he held a mighty unpleasant swell of rage just beneath the surface of his large, flat, smooth face.

"Sure," he said softly, handing over his bottle and getting up to leave. The woman beside him suddenly chirped up, saying, "Hey stranger, what do they call you, anyway?"

"My name's Bart," he lied.

She suddenly fluttered her eyelashes, turning her rather plain, hard features into as pretty and inviting a mask as was possible, under the circumstances.

"Feel like a little company?"

"Feel like taking a walk?" he answered, pushing his stool in and claiming his cigarettes off of the counter. A few heads popped up, drunkenly; one or two wore knowing leers. She seemed to brighten a little, asked, "Can I have a beer first?"

"Sure thing." He pulled out a wad of money, flashing it ostentatiously, and skimmed off one dollar.

"Bring the lady anything she wants. Hey, what do they call you?"

"I'm Marie."

She took some time drinking, trying to make small talk, but he only felt an engorged lust begin to creep inside of his entrails. He wanted, more than anything, to be away from the hot, stifling confines of the empty bar. The walk back to his room was going to seem like a shot of bliss to his groggy mind.

"So, you been coming here a long time?"

She spoke a little warily, a little nervously. He tried to put her mind at rest.

“I work at the plant over yonder. Actually, I’ve only been here once before, in all the time I’ve worked there. And then I was only in here for a short time.”

“Oh.”

She asked, a little softly. “Are you married?”

“No. Got no wife...no kids. I’m a lonely fellow, you might say.”

She considered, sipped her beer, said, “Uh huh.” She realized tonight might shape up to be a long stroke of pure luck.

“I got my own place, if that’s what you’re wondering. Say, a girl as pretty as you shouldn’t be out whoring around. Just my opinion.”

Her head shot around, and she looked, all of a sudden, half-angry.

“Hey you got a lot of nerve...” She started to sound offended, then something shifted behind her eyes. She looked, suddenly, as if playing coy games with the truth was pointless.

“I’m sorry. I simply call them as I see them. Anyway, are you about ready? I need to be getting home.”

She doffed the rest of her beer in one swallow, said, “Alright,” and got up off the stool, making sure to scrape up the small pile of change in front of her. As they walked out the door, Artie was bent over a sleeping drunk, trying to arouse him and get him moving.

He felt the air reach him, clear his mind, and he took off for home at a leisurely pace, while his date for the evening trailed more cautiously a foot or two behind him.

He slowed a little, allowing her to catch up, said, “Nice night, huh?”

“Nice...morning. It’s almost two in the morning.” She glanced down at her cheap watch. Her heels clacked a bit on the pavement.

“Say, how come you don’t have a car? You seem like you got money enough.”

“Can’t drive.”

“Why, was you in a wreck or something? Are you scared?”

He sighed. Her conversation was as dull, as prosaic, as the collection of rambling, run-to-riot little dump houses that lined the street all the way up to the train tracks. She was every bit as stolid, as empty, as so many factory warehouses, and her foundation, he imagined, was just as dirty and clotted with grime.

“Nope,” he exhaled, a little lost in the melancholy of the evening. “I never learned how. It’s as simple as that. Now, why don’t you have a car?”

“I can’t afford one.”

“How did you get here?”

“I live real close by. I walk to the bar every night. Usually, I get someone to give me a ride.”

They lapsed into silence.

“Where do you live?”

“Huh?”

“How much farther? My dogs are killing me.”

He looked on ahead. He lived upstairs of a two-story house that had seen better days. The landlady was a small, suspicious old woman that barely left the confines of her living room, had her groceries delivered, and only emerged, seemingly, to go to the doctor or a church social. She never, oddly, actually attended church.

They crossed the tracks, went down the hill, turned on the walk and he pointed down to the end of the street, saying, “Right up there, home sweet home.”

The place, set far back from the street, brooded darkly in the night. If it hadn’t been for the convenience of a fat moon, no one could have spotted it from here. Somewhere, he heard the low whistle and faint rumble of an approaching train.

“Kind of spooky out here,” he said.

“Yeah, sure.”

She sounded like she hadn’t really heard him, No imagination, he thought, and said, “Say, do you believe in ghosts?”

“No. Never seen one.”

He considered a moment, said, “Well, I have. And my place is as haunted as can be.”

“Get out of here!”

“No, it’s true. I’m laying there in bed some nights, and all of a sudden I start to hear a moaning and a wailing, and, sometimes, I can even see like a...Oh, I don’t know, like a misty white *shape*, or something, in the darkness.”

“Oh,” she said, unenthusiastically. She obviously now had made up her mind that he was some kind of nut. Either that, or she believed more in ghosts than what she herself had even suspected.

Finally, they reached the rickety old chain-link fence, and he pulled it open, the rusty hinges squealing in the silence of the night, competing with the heavy chirp of crickets and the rumble of the passing locomotive.

He led her up the walk, she trailing behind a tad more cautiously now.

The house, gleaming in the moonlight with all of the windows black (by now, his landlady was, surely, fast in her own dreamless sleep), seemed as vast and imposing and old as its long Victorian windows and doorways suggested. As she followed him into the darkness of the hallway, the musty smell of mildewed carpet and stale air wafting up to meet their nostrils, he could tell that she did, indeed for a moment, actually believe in haunted houses. He turned on the hallway light, bent, whispered into her ear that she should try to be as quiet as possible, and proceeded up the staircase, his tired hand trailing easily along the dusty, ancient banister, and began to tip-toe after him, wincing at every squeak of the floor boards.

He went to the door on the left at the top of the stairs, rattled his keys in the darkness, dropped them, picked them back up, and finally got the door open. He entered, gropingly, turned on a lamp, and then motioned for her to get the hallway light. She flicked it off, after searching for it for a moment, and then walked in, shutting the door behind her.

His room was, surprisingly large and very neat. She was slightly impressed, for she knew men to be inveterate pigs. There was a small bed, a couch, a radio propped up on the dresser, an old trunk, and a few books scattered here and about. She hated books.

She sat down heavily on the couch, began to take her shoes off, looked up, and said, "Okay, just so you know, I don't come cheap. So, we need to settle on a price first."

"What are your average rates?" he asked, without missing a beat.

"Five dollars will get you a hand job. Ten and you can put it in my mouth. Twenty and you can screw me straight. Twenty-five will get you the works. What'll it be, huh?"

He took out his wallet again, sighed, peeled off three tens, and handed them over, his hands beginning to tremble a little in anticipation. She seemed much more relaxed now, took the money, put it quickly into her purse, and asked "Hey, you got anything to drink? I think it's always better when you're good and liquored up. My, you are a handsome man, though, I must admit."

He reached into the bottom drawer, pulled out a half-a-fifth of bourbon, asked, "You want to just drink it from the bottle, right?"

In answer, she took it from him, smiled mischievously, and, twisting the cap off of the top, took a massive swig, liking the raw burn of the liquor on her throat.

He sat down next to her, began to fumblingly work the buttons of her blouse, as she relaxed beneath him. She spread herself on the couch, and

soon, they were lying naked, he on top of her, attempting, madly, to thrust himself inside.

As great as his passion was, however, his body would do little to cooperate. He couldn't maintain his erection, and the sex quickly degenerated into a sweat soaked wallowing that left him frustrated and embarrassed.

For her part, his whore didn't seem to mind too much; she shrugged, reclined, her head resting on her arm, and said, "It's okay, baby. Happens to the best of 'em. We can try later, if you want."

He rose up from her breast, his body dripping, and sat at her feet for a moment, staring off into the darkness. In a moment, tears would begin to flow, and he was thankful that she could not see them, or it would have shamed him more.

He offered no explanation for his lack of sexual performance, but instead lit a cigarette, puffed a sigh from between his cheeks, and said, pointing down at her vague, naked form, "You can sleep here until morning, if you want."

"I want. We can try again when you wake up, if you want to." She at least sounded sympathetic; human. He was appreciative of that, at the very least.

A mad part of him felt rage boil inside of his breast, rage mixed with self-loathing; the aftermath of sexual frustration. He knew that lesser men, under the circumstances, had done rash and violent things; crimes of passion committed in a white heat of anger and resentment at the female sex. He was proud of the measure of restraint that still beat within his heart. He was still a human being, after all.

He sat on his bed, listening to her swig the bottle empty, until, finally she must have passed out. He himself could only sit upright on his bunk, naked, pondering a weight inside his soul that seemed to grow heavier with every passing day. Yes, some men were weak, given to immediate acts of senseless violence. These men, he reflected, didn't carry his weight of purpose. They didn't, really, understand the concept of sweet vengeance.

Some men were weak, but not him. Not now. Maybe, someday, when he had finally cleared the books of an old and pressing debt, he could afford to simply self-destruct in the manner to which he felt most appropriate. Until then, he could hold it together. He could be a rock.

He didn't know what time he had passed into unconsciousness, but, when he did, it was to a world troubled by images of death, of torment, of violence and vengeance. He felt, in his dream, like a raging lion, finally let

out of a cage, and surrounded by fat and willing sheep. And, somewhere, in the midst of all these fluffy white victims, he saw one face, and one face only, that he knew he must close in on, for the kill.

Sunday morning beamed unhappily, a faint streak of orange falling across his eyes, and he slowly, groggily, came to, the effects of the alcohol (he had never been much of a drinker) still lingering in his skull. He was half-way wondering if the whore he had picked up last night was really serious about trying again this morning. After all, he had paid a pretty penny, and he knew most normal men would demand their money's worth.

He needn't have wondered. When he finally rolled off of his bed and stood up, he could see that she had already gone. So much for promises.

He came back to his room several hours later, having spent the day doing not much more than wandering around town, looking at the empty reminders of yesterday. His emotions, for whatever reason, had been riding him since he first awoke to find himself alone. He had had several embarrassing moments when tears sprang to his eyes, a great welter of sorrow washing up like a dismal tide inside his breast. One such occasion had happened as he had simply been ambling along through the dust of a busy street. Another, when he had been sitting over a coffee and sandwich at the lunch counter he frequented downtown. He had tried to hide his face, his head resting on his hand, his eyes focusing on the steaming black circle in his mug. He looked up for a moment, shaken at the clatter of dishes in the kitchen window, the rattle of the door, the sudden yell from one old chum to another across the crowded dining room. All of a sudden, he felt a cold fist of fear and misery clasp his entrails.

Faces looked strange to him. Mouths opened and closed, soundlessly, the words seeming to issue forth from some void inside and float, like strange cryptogrammic signals from another planet. Who in the hell were these people?, he pondered. For all that, who was he? What was he doing here, and what did it all possibly mean?

What's the point of it? Of any of it? I might as well walk out of here and into a speeding truck. I might as well disappear, into the sunset. Into the void.

He felt, all of a sudden, vulnerable, as if the leering grins and shifting eyes could see inside of him, could unmask every secret, terrible, forbidden thing he had ever pondered or contemplated, could count the numbers of sins hatched and committed in the spaces where his guilt and shame could never reach.

Anyone of them, everyone of them...They could all be crazy. Or dead. Or

just a dream. Maybe I'm already in hell.

He got up, paid in a hurry, got the hell out of there, walked the streets in a daze, feeling the buildings and sidewalks, the parking lots and pedestrians, all close around him like a vast, enfolding prison of the soul, a prison into which he had been born, and of which he had only become conscious of in the last year. A prison could have no walls, and still be a prison; a prison could be your life, the world, your mind.

He went up to his room on shaking legs, not certain if he could stand another day on the factory floor, another day of the same cold drudgery, another night of the creeping loneliness, and anger, and fear...

He had tried to interest himself in a radio program, turning up the dial a little too loudly, not really, for the moment, caring. He supposed, in an hour or so, if he didn't turn it down he would hear a little pit-pat on his door, the old lady reminding him that while she was nearly blind, she was most certainly not yet deaf, and *could he please turn that racket down so a body could get some rest?*

He did as she instructed, and she had not even yet come up to complain. He took his shoes off, whisked around the hardwood floor in his socks, pacing, contemplating, and planning the immediate future.

In the old trunk at the foot of his bed, he had his Dad's old service revolver. It was a real beauty, and he had kept that gun as clean and well-oiled as was possible under the circumstances. He had few possessions, and he had been known, at times when money was exceedingly tight, to pawn those off. Mostly to pay debts.

He could still get a free meal when he went back home. But he rarely ever did that now. Too many reminders. His mother and sister seemed like strangers now that dad was gone, and he didn't need to be sticking his fat nose in their lives any more than was necessary. He had never been a good boy; he was in even worse shape as a man.

His younger sister, he knew, was engaged to Gerald Katz, and Gerald was going to be a lawyer. Of course, he was a Jew, but he had already said he was willing to convert, and Gerald came from money. They would look out for Ma after he was gone. There would be no need to announce it to the world; he would disappear for awhile, hit the road, maybe see a few new places. Whatever he did, he planned to do it as drunk as possible.

Then, when the time was right, he would find an old field, or maybe a wooded place by a stream, and he would put the barrel of that old revolver in his mouth, and go out of the world the way he had come into it: with an anguished cry.

First however, there was one pressing matter that needed to be taken care of, one issue that had waited too long to be resolved. He didn't fancy himself a bitter man (of course, the few others that knew him had a completely different opinion), and he, truly, didn't feel himself to be the type that took to exacting revenge over even the most grievous of wrongs. But he had sworn to himself, nearly two years ago, that if he lived to be a hundred years old, he would see that sick old bastard pay for what he had done to his family. To his sister.

He bent low, feeling his knees crack like twin pistons, opened the lid, and fished out the gun, looking at the sleek, functional wonder sit, like a deadly omen, a mighty symbol of force and righteousness, on his hard, flat palm. He curled his fingers tightly around the grip.

One bullet. One bullet was all it took to change the world. To change everything. He felt a hot instant of pure, unrepentant longing to fire a bullet just now, but knew he must wait. Until the time was right.

He placed the gun on the floor beside him, fished around in his clothing, and came upon a wrapped parcel that he had been carrying with him for quite some time. He carefully unwrapped it, with fingers that suddenly trembled a little, and held it carefully before him. He could feel his throat catch, could feel the old anger and rage began to grow again, until finally, he became set, once more, on the course of action he had decided to take all those many months back. If ever he believed in fate, he believed in it now.

He held the strange little artifact in his hands, crying again, feeling the wet splash of tears upon his cheeks, and later, sitting in silence as the room grew dark, he had the germ of a plan begin to develop in his mind. A final plan of action.

And a sense of finality, he reflected, was something he had lately been intimately familiar with.

It was awhile in coming, but, in time, Carl had the old place, somewhat feeling like a home again.

Of course, he very rarely ventured out. Mostly he sat in his robe, or puttered around half-dressed, day after day, living off of what his attorney collected for the rents, as well as whatever else he brought in on his stocks. It was not the class act of being a respected local physician, but it kept him in food and paid bills.

There was no question, of course, of his ever going back to practicing medicine. He was damn lucky, after all, that no one had inquired too closely

concerning his credentials. It was odd, true, considering that since his arrest and confinement last year, seemingly every other facet of his existence had become an open book. But what did it matter if they revoked his license, anyway? There would never be another patient to cross the empty threshold of his former offices again.

In fact, as he sat, day in and day out, in the steadily declining environment of the old house, he took a certain pleasure in the fact that his mere presence back at home must, indeed, be driving property values down. The neighbors to the one side of his property had long since departed, and the neighbors to the other side apparently were about to follow suit. A few punks came by occasionally, yelling insults and foolishness, and he had even had a youth or two bean him with a pebble. But it was all very minor, and for this he was thankful.

He felt he could settle in, quite comfortably, if not altogether happily, in his role as neighborhood boogeyman. He sometimes wondered if he should skulk about his garden at night, dressed in a cape.

He was aware that people were watching him, whatever he did and wherever he went. There were no trips downtown, and all the groceries were delivered, by a very nervous boy, to the front porch. After taking the check and pocketing his tip, the lad was seen to nearly run down the walk in a state of what seemed to be barely suppressed terror. The look on his face lighted the fire in Carl's old eyes.

"Fangs," he said to himself. "I need a pair of plastic vampire fangs. Oh, Halloween will really see this old place become a local tourist attraction. I can already see the tangled knot of little terrors assembling at one corner of the walk, dressed in their bed sheets like little Klansmen, all holding their little trick-or-treat bags, whispering and daring each other to walk up this way and knock on the door."

He ruminated, out loud, to himself, since, barring an occasional visit from his attorney, there was no one else to speak to. His own voice now sometimes surprised him, being that the only other voice he ever heard was the sound of the radio, usually in the late afternoon when even the young kids stopped playing and went indoors to eat hot suppers, meals that must have tasted far superior to anything he had eaten in a long time.

"So Hitler has invaded Poland", he thought aloud one afternoon. "Well, bully for him. I like a man that knows what he wants." He then realized that there was no one else present to object to his rude cynicism, and he quieted down, wondering if the Captain Midnight Decoder Ring was really all that it was cracked up to be. So many little Billys and Teddys sending in their

Ovaltine box tops, and what did it amount to? A piece of worthless junk, most likely.

Intellectually, he knew he was stagnating. He tried to read through old books, bits of newspaper, even catch up on his medical journals, but his mind, so battered and imposed upon in recent months, failed to be able to fix on anything much more demanding than a radio program or what he was going to fix himself for dinner.

There was also the occasional moments when, confined like a prisoner to the relative safety of his own home, he seriously contemplated simply taking his life. Wouldn't be hard, he reflected. He could do it by rope, by sleeping tablets, by lying down in the bathtub upstairs, a bottle of scotch in one hand and a razor blade in the other. He even contemplated burning down the house with himself locked up in it.

Then at last, he felt, he could be free of the confines of this crazy world. A quick end to a life that had gone, at least from the viewpoint of the society that he was obliged to be a member of, completely haywire. A bitter end perhaps, almost certainly a painful one, but an end, nonetheless, and one that might win him an even greater piece of the burgeoning folklore he suspected was growing up around him in his own home town.

Rumors. Innuendo. Real gems, like:

Tanzler ordered five pounds of raw meat, and ate it in front of the delivery boy while he was standing there.

Tanzler has been seen wandering through Morning Side cemetery, looking at the tombstones and weeping.

Tanzler sits up all night playing his organ, hoping that the music will wake up his dead girlfriend.

Tanzler is a German spy, a second cousin twice removed to Hitler, a Martian masquerading as a man, a dope addict, and wears women's dresses around the house.

Tanzler files his back teeth down to put the bite on unsuspecting female pedestrians walking home from late-night Bingo games.

On and on it would go, the ignorant clucking of over-burdened tongues and weak, terrified, sordid little imaginations. He sniffed indignantly. If only these sorry simpletons really knew what had gone on here, within these four walls, they would have something to cluck about. He then thrust this thought from his mind as quickly as possible.

He felt a sudden strain in the center of his forehead. He knew, quite well, that those particular memories had been collected, collated, codified, and condemned as his own mad delusions. Well, they had him believing that for

awhile, didn't they? He still halfway dismissed it all as some sort of psychic fugue state that he had been unfortunate enough to enter during his emotional crisis. Of course, this viewpoint had been drilled into him damn near with thumbscrews for the past year, and he had had to assimilate it into his own consciousness in a way that was convincing enough to allow him, finally, to taste freedom again. He knew he had maintained some rather shocking facts; he also knew that the authorities didn't believe him guilty of anything more than grave-robbing and necrophilia, acts which were socially repugnant, but not serious enough to warrant any real amount of prison time.

It was amazing, he reflected, that he had been allowed to leave the custody of the authorities with such startling ease. Of course, when one had a crooked lawyer pulling for you, most anything was possible, eventually.

He decided to settle in and wait. If there was any truth to what he surmised, then he didn't need to do anything but wait.

"They also serve who only sit and wait," he said to himself, during one of his lonely patrols around the confining premises of his old, dark house. Was that how he thought of himself, really? As a servant?

The dead he knew, were hungry to taste life once more. Rose had been the gateway; he had been the key. Now, the world would wake up some morning, and never be the same again.

It was not long after the reign of these ominous thoughts that the first, quiet whisperings began to sound in his ears. A hissing cacophony of voices, one overlapping the other, some joining in in strange melody, reflecting each other in an abysmal echo that set his teeth on edge, and had him clapping his ears, at times, in agony. And did the shadows sometime flit, unexpectedly, out of the corner of his watering eyes? He wasn't sure.

Later, he began to feel more certain of his own sanity, once again.

These country roads, somehow, always left him feeling a little out-of sorts, psychotically. There was a mystification in the desolation; the endless rows of rotting barns, dilapidated old fences, run-to-riot yards, swaying fields of wheat and corn, and, above all, the hard twinkle of a million, billion stars, stretching out toward infinity. Of course, certain country lanes eventually cut through small, forgotten patches of wood, past grassy, leafy hills, and gravel packed drives leading up to houses that squatted grey and forlorn, their rear flanked by the inevitable faded flannel wash hanging from an old clothesline in the yard, catty corner to an old tree that had dangled from it, like a condemned man, the proverbial tire swing. He had passed a

country maid, the creases in her face probably as dusty and deep as the canals of an alien planet, her hips yea wide and her arms as strong as iron bands from hanging decades worth of wash up in the backyard to dry, and had secretly thanked his lucky stars that he wasn't born to a farm boy's life. But he was also thankful that someone was.

He drove the short distance taking his time, collecting his thoughts. He had a book to write, damn it, and whether or not it would become a success or not depended on what he could wring from the old man while he was here. His last few secrets, maybe?

He just didn't have enough, that was all. He needed more, needed to get into the head of the old skunk if he was going to make this particular piece work. He was a thorough, consummate professional when it came to his working life, both on the street and in front of the typewriter. The crook-noses already knew that, and his readers learned it soon enough. It was what bought him respect in most quarters, and implacable hatred in others.

He had intentionally started out late, hoping to knock on the old man's door right before he turned in for the night. He knew that people were more malleable when they were tired; easier to get at, to convince that a few friendly questions, an informal visit, was really nothing to get excited about. And, considering that it had been himself who had finally pulled the rug out from under Tanzler's bizarre post-mortem passion pit--considering that Tanzler had crumpled in front of him like a cheap doll when he had finally stepped forward and grabbed the gun--he felt almost certain that the man was afraid of him, still perceived him as a threat. He sincerely hoped so; it would make Carl Tanzler putty in his hands.

If not--if the old man refused to admit him, or refused to answer any of his more sensitive questions--well, then, he knew there were other ways to do things. He had a Plan B, always did. After all, the sick old buzzard had blackjacked him, tried to kill him, and was one species of the most heinous pervert he had even encountered (and he had come across his fair share in his particular line of work). If he got slapped around a little, or even a lot, if he was threatened or pistol-whipped, nobody would much care. Least of all himself.

He reflected that, when he was a kid, a guy that got caught doing what Carl Tanzler had done would have been strung up by his neck on the courthouse steps, like a hapless negro. In some parts of this country, a black man could get lynched for merely looking at a white woman the wrong way. Yet Tanzler walked around a free man. Was this justice? He didn't think so.

What, after all, was the world coming to?

The package had arrived earlier that day.

He had had to sign for it, and the postal clerk had given him the same cold, hard, intriguing stare that he was so accustomed to by now. He had brought the thing inside, unhappily, and placed it on the table in the dining room, where it sat, ominously, for hours.

Of course, he had already received the typical influx of crank mail and obscene letters. Hate-filled missives brimming with vague threats, weird ramblings from mental degenerates interested in exploring various perversities, and thinking Tanzler a kindred spirit. One man had called several days in a row, speaking in a husky breath, asking Carl questions about "What was it like, you know?"

"No, I do not know to what you are particularly referring. Could you please elaborate?" Carl had been pouring himself a glass of brandy; in a strange way, he enjoyed this break from his isolating routine.

"You know, when you...when you did it with her. Was it good and moist? Did it make you hard?"

There was a faint flapping in the background. The pumping of a fist. Carl suddenly realized that the man was masturbating furiously.

He said, "Best I ever had. You should try it yourself. It'd be a great way to lose your virginity."

He slammed the phone down before the man reached his climax. He rolled a cigarette, grinned, then, burst out laughing in spite of himself.

He was not laughing now, however. He eyed the thing ominously, wondering what could be inside. It put him off because it was quite large, had a considerable weight, and rattled a bit in the package. Of course, he had listened first to see if it was ticking.

It was simply wrapped in plain brown paper; large, square, with no discernable markings and no name. What to do?

Suddenly, the whispering came upon him again, as unintelligible as always, and very quiet. But there, nonetheless.

The thing to do now, he reflected, was drink. This thing was some sort of sick gag, and he would only partake in the tomfoolery when he got good and ready to. Or, until curiosity got the better of him.

"Killed the cat, it did. Here's to the practical jokers of the world. May they rot, in hell."

He lifted his shot glass, tossed back the liquor, felt his throat burn, coughed, got up, got his pouch of tobacco, and sat in the cubby by the kitchen window, watching the sun go down.

He had apparently fallen asleep, because the house was completely dark by the time he stumbled up, nearly knocking the table and the mysterious package over in the process. It took a moment to clear his head, the whirling images of the dream he had been having escaping, like smoke, into the recesses of his subconscious mind. Suddenly, he felt cold fear grip his heart. It was a knocking at the door that had awoke him.

He went to the window, looked out. There was a tall, solid-looking man standing, with his back turned toward the door, and his hands in his pockets. He was smoking a cigarette.

He thought he recognized the man, but it was hard to tell. He decided to let him knock.

The man continued.

He knocked louder, longer, more insistently. He, apparently, wasn't going anywhere.

He knows I'm here, whoever he is.

Tanzler cowered in front of the door, feeling himself shiver in the darkness. He tried to steel himself, but every pounding at the door by the insistent fist seemed to seize his chest, leaving his heart hammering wildly. Suddenly, he found his wind of courage, tired of the knocking, and reached over to flip on the porch light.

Baumgartner suddenly found himself momentarily blinking in surprise at the brightness of the light. He found himself eagerly awaiting the creaking open of the door. He was not disappointed.

The front door opened a crack, and the face of Carl Tanzler was suddenly framed for him, looking cheesy and pale in the electric porch light.

The two men stared at each other for what seemed an interminable, silent moment, and then Tanzler let the door fall open the rest of the way.

"Well, well, well," he began, slowly, "You have a lot of nerve coming back here, Mr. Baumgartner. Haven't you already done enough damage?"

Baumgartner felt his mouth fall open in indignation, looked sideways a moment, as if to say, "You honestly feel like you're the injured party in this? You're the one that cold-cocked and tried to kill me, buddy. Not the other way around."

Instead, he said, after a pause, "May I come in?"

Tanzler, his facial expression opening wide in mock hospitality, held his hand out low with the palm up, turned sideways, and motioned Baumgartner in saying, "Why of course, Mr. Baumgartner. It's always a pleasure."

Baumgartner stepped into the darkness slowly, taking off his hat, making

sure to keep one good eye on the old man at all times. In a few minutes, he was ushered into the former office, sat heavily in one of the antique, high-backed chairs, folded his hands, and watched Tanzler root around in his desk absent-mindedly for a moment. He was shocked at how thin, and pale, and old the man looked these days; how utterly underfed and unkempt he seemed, wrapped in his bathrobe and sweater straight up to the icy point of his stubbly chin. The old man grabbed a thin pouch of tobacco, took a pinch of the stuff, and began to roll for himself a cigarette.

"I hope you aren't thirsty. I don't keep alcohol in the house anymore. Too expensive."

"That's okay, Doc. I wouldn't have accepted anything from you, anyway. No, my reason for coming here is to tie up some loose ends in my own investigation. You see, I need some information, and I need it from the horse's mouth, so to speak."

"Mr. Baumgartner, if you'll excuse me for being so blunt, it is late, and I have nothing to say to you."

Baumgartner fished in his jacket, found his cigarette case, pulled out a fresh smoke, clicked the case shut, and tapped the end against the lid, packing the cheap tobacco in more firmly. He cocked the smoke in the corner of his mouth, leaned forward in the chair, and said, "I think you do. Yeah, sure you do. Like giving me the straight dope on all those phony murders you confessed to. I think it's pretty strange that a rational, seemingly-intelligent man such as yourself should find himself so hopelessly muddled by his own imagination." He produced a match, seemingly from nowhere, flicked the end, lit his cigarette, and then inhaled deeply, exhaling smoke and sitting back in the chair, resting his arms and crossing his legs. He wondered how long it would be before he had to start kicking into Plan B.

"I was a troubled person then. A very sick person. I'm better now, completely cured of my illness. I'm trying to put all of that behind me. Ashtray's right there."

He pointed beside the chair, and Baumgartner leaned over, plunked the matchstick in the can, and then considered his next words very carefully.

"Tanzler, have you killed people?"

"Not that I recall."

Carl smiled. If Baumgartner thought that he could waltz in here anytime that he wanted, act the proverbial tough, and have him pissing his pants in terror, he had another thing coming.

"Well, okay, how about ancient history? How about the confessions you

poured out when you were an inmate upstate? How about the hooker? I mean, so far, we can verify that all the victims you confessed to offing are, fortunately I suppose, still alive. But you didn't give us enough detail about that particular incident. This was the one where you claim you and the ghost of Rose--"

"She was NOT a ghost."

"Okay, well, whatever, anyway, you brought her back, or she came back, because of a magic spell, or something...and, like a vampire, she needed blood. She needed flesh, a sacrifice. And you were only too happy to comply--"

"Sir, this really has become tiresome."

"Because you loved her," Baumgartner went on heedlessly, "because you needed her to complete you in some fashion. And so you drive out to an old road house...I don't recall where it was."

Tanzler put his shaking fingertips to his temples, sighed deeply, said, "Is that all you want? A few sordid details? Don't you want to know the truth? Don't you want to understand why?"

"I thought I already understood that. I thought you were a 'troubled man', a 'sick man', and that it was all in your mind. Jeez, they must have done a real number on you at Meadow Lane. You don't know up from down anymore."

"The hell you say."

"The hell I do."

Silence.

Tanzler leaned forward, folded his hands together, and tried, mightily, to retain his own innate sense of dignity. He said, "Sir, if you want the story from me, the way I remember it, whether it be true, or whether it be the sad imaginings of a deluded psyche, I can tell you that. I can tell you a good portion of it tonight, but it will take time. I no longer believe that I ever had the capacity to raise people from the dead, nor do I believe that the cadaver I illegally took from the cemetery ever had the spark of life renewed in it at any time it was in my possession. My actions were abominable, and my only defense was the madness brought on by a broken heart and an over-imaginative, hysterical brain. But if you must know the root of my neurosis, I suppose that I can disabuse you of any false notions you may have accrued from Dr. Chalmers."

"Okay, so let's hear it."

Tanzler leaned back, considering. He could possibly acquiesce enough to get Baumgartner out the door for tonight. There were, of course, aspects of

the whole business he couldn't go into, things he didn't, himself, understand. But the man was obviously searching for something, possibly something for an article, maybe even something to pen between the pages of a sordid pot boiler. Either way, Tanzler's only concern at the moment was to see the man leave, as quickly as possible.

"All right, Mr. Baumgartner, as you wish. I must confess to you, then, that everything, every single, solitary word I poured forth in those confessions to Dr. Chalmers, was true. All of it. I made contact with a secret group, a sort of underground cult who had a faith the central tenet of which was that they had received a mandate from God to revivify the dead. I went to an appointed location and witnessed one of their ceremonies, which was unfortunately interrupted by a posse of legal authorities. Don't bother checking that, there's no record of it, and the house was long ago abandoned. You're looking at me incredulously. Well, you wanted the whole kit and kaboodle, sonny, and now you're getting it."

Baumgartner nodded, his attention rapt. He, suddenly, felt a fool, for a reason he could not yet discern.

"Continue? Very good. As I was saying, the place where the rite was being performed was apparently being invaded by some legal authority. I never saw an detective or police officer myself, although I did hear the sounds of their boots running up the stairs. I escaped with the priest of the cult, a rather dashing, mysterious young man, and we spent the night hiding in a mausoleum as Mourning Side cemetery. It was here that he first gave me the secret of...of reanimating the dead, of bringing them back to the world of the living again. I had already procured the body of Rose Steinmetz because...because I am a stubborn, damnable old man, and possessed of an iron will and refused to simply let go. I saw no harm in it, at the time. Little did I know that it would ruin me, forevermore."

Baumgartner found himself strangely elated and disappointed at the same time. And, also, he was now sure that this strange old man was, indeed, truly insane. Did that mean, however, that he was capable of murder?

"So, if you knew how to perform these...resurrections, and were successful at them, why is it that you needed to go to all the trouble to preserve and reconstruct that body, the way you did? They displayed her, you know, at the county courthouse, for a long line of local yokels who all wanted a peek at what you had been doing up here in your off hours. One cop told me several people nearly fainted; one got sick and threw up on the floor. They closed the damn thing early after that. So much reconstruction it didn't seem like there could possibly be a real body under there anymore.

Looked like a doll.”

Tanzler closed his eyes to slits, sighed, and said, “I wished you hadn’t have told me that. It has been hard enough having to suffer the scorn and hatred of this community, of having my good named tarnished forever, of having to deal with the constant threats, harassment, and other forms of subtle abuse the ignorant see fit to heap upon me. Do you know they had a large, angry town meeting when word got out about my release. Surprised they didn’t burn me in effigy.”

“I’m surprised they haven’t burned you in the flesh, Tanzler. In fact, I’m shocked we’re both sitting here, in this house, discussing this right now. I’d have laid money on the state moving you to an undisclosed location, under an assumed identity.”

“Money was the key word you just said, Mr. Baumgartner, and my lawyer is the best in town. He worked miracles for me, even when I didn’t expect it. As for my neighbors, I could give a rat’s ass about how they feel about me, and likewise, I’m sure. I wasn’t convicted of rape, or murder, or molesting a child. I wasn’t convicted of *anything* in particular, except having sexual tastes that run contrary to what the law and the God-fearing hypocrites of this piss ant burg deem normal. As far as the crime of grave robbery is concerned, the Judge found that the Statute of Limitations had already expired by the time I was apprehended, and that prosecuting me was impossible. The authorities thus, found their only recourse for punishment to be a hypothetically indeterminate stay in a festering snake pit of a sanitarium. They saw fit to send me to Meadow Lane. Dr. Chilton Chalmers saw fit to release me before the State was satisfied I had been sufficiently made to suffer. Here I sit.”

Baumgartner felt himself stir, taking all of this in. He was glad he had decided to drive down here this evening, to get the story from the first-person source, no matter how crazy, albeit, that source actually was. He said, “Yes. Now, I’ve checked on that business about the cult, and the raid, and all of it. No legal authority in this jurisdiction has any idea or recollection about that, and I’m assuming that, if they had happened on a den of death worshippers or necrophiles, it would have made the local papers. It would be filed away in a big report. Someone would remember something like that, don’t you agree? No one I talked with had the foggiest clue, which means, as I’m sure Dr. Chalmers must have made clear to you a thousand times, that *it didn’t happen*, Tanzler. At least, not the way you say it did.”

“I said that some legal authority, of some form or other, raided the temple

of this particular group of necromancers. I didn't say it was the local Sheriff's Dept. I don't think it was the O.S.S., although that hypothesis is as good as any. Tell me: Do you not think that there are underground groups and movements, vast, shadowy forces dueling it out with each other, just below the surface of what we are allowed to know and be aware of? Do you think that power begins and ends in Washington D.C. , or are you aware, as I have been for years, that there are secret societies, organizations that pull the strings on the great conspiracy which we call our lives and the workaday world?"

Crazy. Absolutely out of his gourd. I'm surprised he hasn't started in yet about invaders from Mars.

Baumgartner suddenly found himself scribbling, unobtrusively, his small notebook propped against the crook of his folded leg. Tanzler seemed to take no notice.

"At any rate, the body, which I had so carefully and painstakingly preserved to the best of my abilities, began to deteriorate too rapidly for me to compete with. So I took a shot in the dark: I devised a ritual of my own making, a ritual to bring the soul back from beyond the veil, and to impart it, once again, in the body of Rose. And then, because she commanded it of me, and because I loved her more madly and completely than any woman--because, of course, she had helped me, an old sawbones, defeat the one stalking horse I had never been able to outrun, Old Man Death--I then murdered Imelda Cove, and Rose drained her of blood and life and vitality, and managed to restore herself. I think it was a small price to pay. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, very much so. Considering the fact that the woman you accuse yourself of having murdered is inconveniently still alive. I know. As I've said, I spoke with her not many months back. She's in Chicago. Married again. Her and her new husband seem quite happy. Or, is that all just a part of the conspiracy, too?"

Tanzler smiled. Inside his mind, he was reeling between what he knew to be the truth, and what he had been forced to accept as the truth while he was incarcerated under state supervision. He felt like there was a battle, a losing battle, being waged within. The release of all this, pent-up for so long, was actually cathartic, and now he felt not the least bit drowsy, but felt as if he could continue for hours.

"Yes, a woman calling herself Imelda Cove is alive and seemingly well. She may even believe that herself. She will, no doubt, bear the general appearance of Imelda Cove, and have mastered many of her habits and

mannerisms...”

Baumgartner felt the icy prickles begin to play at the back of his neck. It was too perfect; the delusion of a man whose mind had constructed a fantasy that, no matter how hard anyone tried, could not be discarded out of hand, disproved or taken apart. He knew, then, that Tanzler should have spent the rest of his unwholesome life at Meadow Lane. It was a real crime that the old man wasn't locked up there, now.

“So, what you're in effect telling me is, is that Imelda is one of these...what? Zombies? Something from Haiti that walks around looking as if it crawled out of a freshly dug grave? You expect me to swallow that?”

“I don't expect anything from you, Mr. Baumgartner, but bad manners and rude behavior. However, you wanted to know.”

Baumgartner finished scribbling a sentence, said, “Yes. Yes I did. So what exactly are you trying to put together for me, Tanzler?”

“What I've been saying to the doctors since this whole thing began: that the dead are returning to us, little by little. That they are hungry again for sensation, for pleasure, for the myriad little joys and pleasures that make up life and living. Don't you see? They are desperate for release. Haven't you ever considered what death might be like? It is terribly lonely; disappointing. Don't think, for a bare second that everything must, inevitably lead to some logical conclusion, or that the meaning of life is that we might be reborn to greater life. Chaos rules all, my friend. Do not imagine for a mere second that the universe is ordered in a manner that is logical and just. Everyone born will die, and death is not something to just be accepted, or even feared. It is something to be dreaded. It is the most horrible event in all of creation, the cracking of the egg. Light, limitless light surrounds them on their way to a darkness that knows no end of suffering and confusion. A finite mind cannot grasp what lies on the other end of that. So some have escaped, are still escaping...but they need vessels, containers, flesh...”

Baumgartner had been scribbling furiously now. The old man's eyes had taken on a wild, far-away cast, as big as silver dollars and perfectly open in a kind of wild exultation. Baumgartner looked down at Tanzler's hands. They were quivering on top of the desk.

“So...you think that the souls of those who have died are returning to life in our world? By murdering other people?”

“Of course, if you were a religious man Mr. Baumgartner, you would know that the Bible speaks specifically of that, during the last days. In the

book of *Revelations*, where it says the moon shall turn to blood, and the dead will rise, and walk the earth. I don't remember the chapter or verse, exactly, but I have known the queer effects of moonlight and star shine, and I know the dead stir in their graves, and wait to be reborn..."

Tanzler suddenly smiled grimly, said, "But of course, you're not a religious man, are you, Mr. Baumgartner?"

Baumgartner, who felt icy chills grip his arms and back suddenly leaned forward, closed his notebook, and said, "I've never been accused of being a saint, if that's what you mean." The house now seemed as dark and cavernous as the macabre denizen of the night that brooded within its walls. He got up, his knees popping like twin pistons, folded his notebook, dropped it into his pocket, and said, "Thank you, Tanzler. For telling the truth. As you believe it to be, that is. I may want to meet with you again. Is that okay?"

"Why, especially? Surely, you have everything you need for your files. What, are you crafting some sort of article or publication about little ol' me? I can hardly say that I care. My lawyer, on the other hand..."

Baumgartner suddenly bit down on his bottom lip, regretting that he had been too transparent. He stifled the urge to counter the old man's threat of possible litigation, and instead asked a question:

"Tanzler, I asked you if you had ever killed people. You know, I know a killer when I see one, and when I look in your eyes, they seem to go down a million miles deep. They're bottomless. Well, I don't know about the rest of the rot that you've told me. I don't like fairy tales, and yours is particularly far-fetched. But I don't think it's just the ravings of a fanatical and sick mind...I think you're hiding something behind all of this bullshit about zombies and magic. And I intend to find out what it is. Good evening."

Baumgartner put on his hat, turned, saying, "I can find my own way out," and made his way through the darkness to the outer office and the front door. As he went, Tanzler, suddenly furious that he could be so put-upon, yelled, "And a very good night to you too, Sir!" before the front door abruptly shut.

He sat there for a moment, numb with the sensation of having just been forced into a strange confession, and still not sure, entirely, if what he confessed to was accurate and real in the objective sense. Two sides of his mind were busily warring against each other, and he felt, internally, suffused with nervous exhaustion. He got up, went into the kitchen, fixed his eyes on the cabinet after snapping on the light, went for it, found a half-bottle of whiskey, and taking a tumbler from the sink, sat down to pour himself an

angry shot.

“Goddamn snoop. Who the hell does he think he is? Why can’t they just leave me alone? Oh, I’ll be a good boy from now on, I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

His mind raced for a moment, and settled upon a notion that he had been entertaining, actually, for the last several days. Of course, he had dismissed it out of hand: he wasn’t the type to run away from his problems, or to flee just because public opinion was turned sourly against him. But the idea seemed, over a tumbler full of whiskey, not half-bad, and he reckoned that his lawyer could take care of whatever legal and financial entanglements remained back here. He still had his properties, his rents, and with a new name, a new identity, he might live the remainder of his days in comfortable obscurity. He picked up the glass tumbler, drank again, felt the warmth of the alcohol settle him, burn his throat and make his eyes water. He felt the first few tingles of excitement begin to rise in him.

There might be an escape, after all. Why not just take-off? An extended holiday, bearing a new name and heading toward a new destination with all the promise that that entailed. He drank again, starting, haphazardly to concoct some plans.

He had once been to St. Louis on a business trip, and had quite liked it there. Very well, why not sell this old place for whatever he could get for it, and start out early next month? Jolly good. He was getting better at this; since the world had decided, evidently, that it couldn’t stomach him, let him disappear into the night, and take the burden of his memory from this accursed place.

Before him sat the mysterious package that had arrived earlier. He half-way wondered if Baumgartner hadn’t sent it himself, with the expectation that he would open it and, severely affected by whatever lay inside, be more pliant and reasonable when it came time for the detective to call. He let his fingers fall upon the wrapping; it seemed to send a sort of electrical thrill through him.

His curiosity now peaked behind the point of all control (perhaps aided by the alcohol and his general sense of elated confusion) he began to rip the wrapping off the package in large strips, finally dispensing with all of it until it lay in a mutilated state upon the kitchen floor. He looked at the plain cardboard box with bleary eyes. It was tied with regular twine, tightly. He pulled at it for a moment, then got up, went to the drawer, and got a regular kitchen knife. He cut the twine, opened the flaps, and pulled away some brown wrapping paper. Inside was a ball of multicolored material,

apparently wound around something, as if to protect it.

He looked at the odd item for a moment, almost too frightened to put his hands down in the package and pull the thing out.

But it was the work of a moment, and he had it sitting on the kitchen. He carefully began to unwind whatever it was wrapped in the material, and soon realized that the material itself was an old dress. He held it out at arms length, but it didn't ring any bells. It had been wrapped around a heavy object that was hidden, mummy-like, beneath layers of tape and gauze. He went to get a pair of scissors, came back, and, feeling his pulse begin to quicken in anticipation, he started to cut the gauze loose, revealing a white, plaster-like object beneath.

He snipped and pulled, delicately, as if engaging in some sort of delicate surgery. Finally, he had the entirety of the thing revealed.

He dropped the scissors, put his hand to his mouth, and felt a yell catch in his throat, refusing to explode forth and make any noise at all. He stepped back several paces from the table.

At first , he thought that some maniac had mailed him a human head.

It was actually much worse than that.

He sat down at the bar stool, tilting his hat up on the back of his head, his cigarette dangling in front of him from his lips. The place was dark, the patronage looked as lonely as he felt right now, but, on the whole, he didn't know what else he expected.

It was the worst small town dive he had ever been in. The tables were filthy, the chairs were broken, the counter was cracked. It was lit as romantically as a prison cell, and there was a twenty year old Victrola in the corner, its skipping needle playing over the same surface of waxed groove ad infinitum, ad nauseam. A tired woman or two sat around, looking as drab and forlorn, as broken as the surroundings. There were not many men about; one or two dirty locals, and a fairly stewed man he took to be a traveling salesman.

He paid for his beer, drank deeply, and considered what he was searching for here. Answers, perhaps. He wondered, for a moment, if he might not be looking for them in vain. Or, if he wasn't simply making too much out of the old bastard's delusions. Perhaps he was simply chasing after his own feelings of legitimacy as a writer. After all, his editor would, surely, accept whatever he managed to cobble together, with or without scads of additional research.

But there was something about this particular case, some deeper layer of the onion that he couldn't quite peel away. It felt like madness, but he half-fancied he was only standing at the precipice, looking out over a vast chasm that yawned below him, black and impenetrable. He felt cold, lonely fingers touch his heart, and he stared down into the swirling yellow of his beer bottle, and dreamed sad thoughts.

The one woman he had seen, the frumpy, dusty dreg that seemed as if she was more asleep than awake, sauntered up next to him, half sitting at the little stool. Immediately, without her saying a word, the bartender set a clean glass and a freshly opened beer in front of her, and walked into the back. She took out a cigarette, her hands dove-like, white, as if they had been carved from fresh soap, and lit a cigarette. Her fingers trembled somewhat.

He turned, half-wondering if she was who he thought she was, and said, "Some people say that habit kills."

She took a drag, inhaling deeply, and said, "Some people say that. I certainly don't say that. And I don't listen to those that do."

"Smart lady. I'd buy you a drink, but I can see you already have that taken care of."

"You ain't from around here, are ya mister?"

"No fooling. Originally, I'm from Pittsburgh."

She inhaled deeply, and he took out his own cigarette case, pulled out one of the smokes, and popped it in the corner of his mouth. He flicked his lighter, catching a white hot glimpse of her face over the flickering flame, and said, "I don't pay any attention to those old wives tales, either. Smoking can't be bad for you: otherwise they wouldn't sell 'em, right?"

She was no looker; but, then, he wasn't here because he was looking for female companionship. He was, however, looking for a particular female.

"So, you come here often?"

"All the time, pal. What's it to you?"

"Gee whiz, you're a spunky one. I like that quality in a dame. Say, how about you and me blow this joint and go out for a little moonlight cruise?"

"Depends...How much is it worth to you?"

"How does twenty dollars sound?"

"Sounds like you got yourself a deal."

She grabbed her beer, pulled the strap of her purse tighter over her shoulder, and, grabbing him suddenly by the bicep in a grip he wouldn't have credited her with,, let him lead her out the door and into the gravel lot in front.

"That your car?"

“Certainly is.”

“Nice. I think you have nice taste in things. That’s a good sign.”

“That’s what they tell me. Hop in.”

He got in, started up the engine, revved it a bit, leaned over and placed twenty dollars in her palm. He then leaned over and, grabbing her shoulders, pulled her close to him, kissing her deeply, and feeling, despite himself, the first few tinges of a kind of excited, forbidden lust grow inside of himself. But he reminded himself that he was not here to make love.

She smelled, he noted, quite strongly of perfume.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Can’t we just use your car?”

“Not comfortable enough,” he lied. It was actually quite a comfortable car, but he wanted to get away from the bar and get her alone. She would be easier to question and get something along the lines of the truth out of. Putty in his hands. He revved the engine, feeling his pulse quicken again, and headed off into the night. He looked over at her once, taking his eyes off the road for a split second, and felt slightly deflated. But he was, on the whole unsurprised. She wore the expression of one for whom this situation had become routine.

He was so astounded for a moment at what he held in his hands, that it took several seconds for it to register exactly how he should react. He nearly dropped it to the floor, as his hands trembled beneath the cool surface of it. His first thought was that it was an abomination, and that he should, surely, cast it against the wall and break it into a thousand fragments. Instead, with a seemingly inaudible wail ringing out from his lungs, he placed it, carefully, on the kitchen table, put his finger in his mouth, and bit back the urge to sob.

This was some sick bastard’s idea of a lousy joke. The thing stared back at him as he sat, heavily, in a chair. It was, he had to admit, a very fine likeness, for all that.

It was a plaster bust of Rose’s head.

It had been carefully painted, with a precision that, even now, he had to admire. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make this strange effigy; apparently, the face had been cast from death. It must, he reflected, have been someone with access to the body besides himself, perhaps the local undertaker. But, truthfully, it could have been any number of individuals, either in the coroner’s office, the police dept, or the mortuary. He had been told that Rose’s body was put on display, like some sick carnival attraction,

and, of course, a death mask of such a locally famous cadaver would be just what posterity called for. But, why had they then painted it so carefully, so humanly, and then sent their careful, precious work to him? As a gift? As mockery?

The image was both ghastly and surreal. He couldn't look at it for very long, without turning away. Rose's head seemed to emerge from the wood of the table as if it had just been severed, cleanly, and left their for display. Was there no end to the torment he would be forced to suffer?

He stared at the thing, his mind working in two separate directions at once. He should smash it against the wall. He should count his fortunes to have been given such a prize. It was an abominable outrage. It was a thing of rare beauty and craftsmanship. It looked nothing like his Rose. It was the exact likeness of her.

This last was self-evident; already, he had surmised it was a plaster death mask. The fine painting was a fitting, luxuriant touch, but, still, it was a thing more curiosity than beauty. There was no hair; apparently, whoever had sent him this had forgotten to procure a fine black wig to go along with his gift. Perhaps that was why it had taken so long for him to realize what he held.

He stared hard at the thing, fear creeping into his belly. Quite possibly, this was the first indication that someone, somewhere, was threatening him. All the better to make tracks for another part of the country as soon as possible.

Still, he could not help but be drawn, slowly, to the artificial image. Was not reality in the mind, after all? He had believed that once, had trusted his soul to it.

Perhaps this was another chance, another strange eddy or current in the already wrinkled fabric of things, so that he could prove himself a walker of the primrose path between good and evil, God and Devil, Heaven and Hell. Perhaps the Will did predominate, and perhaps, still locked away beneath the cold emotionless veneer he had attained through so many days spent rotting in that dreadful institution, there still lurked the old Promethean fire from within. And, perhaps, just perhaps, it was still, in some subconscious manner, directing fate for him.

"Only the stars know," he said to himself. "Only the stars."

He began to fancy how good the strange little object would look in a fine, expensive wig.

He had driven out onto the lonely highway, the vast fields of American night

stretching around them for miles, dotted only by the occasional farmhouse, chaotic, drooping fence, dilapidated barn, or tall, phallic grain silo, and had patiently plotted within himself concerning what would be the easiest way to wriggle the information he wanted out of her. The stupidity of his position was not lost on him. He had just forked over a considerable amount of money to a woman that might not, truly, know anything of Tanzler and his wild claims, and might be of no fundamental help at all. He was going on instinct, and, tonight, trusting in his pure dumb luck.

“Maybe we can just pull off the road, huh?” He looked over hopefully, noting the apathetic expression on her face. She was, he realized, a cold, distant prospect. This might take some work.

“I know a place we can go. It’s just up here a little way. Turn at the next stop sign, go down until you get to the train tracks. It’s near a little place called Storey. It’s a motel called Lucky’s. I go there all the time.”

He puffed out from between his cheeks, said “You’re the boss”, and started the car in the direction she indicated.

It was several hours later, while he furiously made love to her in the darkness of a hotel room, that he first realized that Tanzler, while he may be many things, was not a madman. It was something in her eyes that first alerted him to the fact that she had been touched, somehow, by the forces of darkness. Perhaps it was the far-off, iced-over look in her eyes; as dull and listless as if her soul had been transported from her body to reside on another planet. Yet, somehow, he found her ravishing. Or, perhaps, it was simply that he wanted to get his money’s worth. When he had finally finished, he simply rolled over, lit a cigarette, and handed one to her.

“Was it enough?”, she asked as innocently and vaguely as if he had been doing nothing at all.

“Well,” he said sheepishly, “it would have been better if you had helped a little.”

They continued to smoke in silence for a few minutes, and he said, “You know, it’s bad news to smoke in bed. Yeah. I’ve seen photos of charred bodies...people that fell asleep with a cigarette in their mouth. Not a wise move. I got a friend, works as a crime photographer. He has quite a collection of pretty pictures. Strange fellow, too. He’s into the occult.”

“The what?”

“Ghosts, witchcraft. Spooky stuff. He’s a musician when he isn’t photographing dead babies and highway accidents.”

“Oh. It doesn’t matter anyway. Death doesn’t frighten me in the least.”

“No? That’s a new one on me, doll face. I’ve never met anyone who wasn’t afraid to take the dirt nap. Fear of killing...of *being* killed, is what makes the world go ‘round. Well...that and money.”

She was silent for a long moment, and he decided to carefully begin broaching the topic which he was truly interested in.

“So, what do you know about death? You’re pretty young to fix your head on such baleful topics.”

“Baleful?”

“Sad, forlorn. I guess different strokes for different folks though.”

“Yeah, I guess. A little while back you said you had something you wanted to ask me. Well, mister, the night ain’t getting any younger.”

He hadn’t expected this, and felt his words catch in his throat.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. Tonight was a bit of a diversion from my usual routine. A nice one, albeit, but still not the reason I came out looking for...a girl like you.”

“And what reason did you have?”

“Have you ever met a man named Tanzler?”

“Mister, I meet a lot of men in my line of work.”

“Yeah, but you would remember this one. Tall, gaunt. Face like a vulture and a thick shock of white hair. Old enough to be your father. Wears a pince-nez, goatee, wing-tip shoes. I know he didn’t tell you his name.”

“Doesn’t strike a chord with me...wait, now that you mention it, I have met him.”

He felt himself suddenly surprised, and sat up, his interest perking, erasing the fatigue of his spent ardor and imbuing him with a new energy again.

“Are you sure? Where? How long ago?”

“Depends. What’s it worth to you?”

“Worth a great deal to me. You see, if you remember reading in the papers about the man they arrested for grave robbing. The man that had kept a dead body in his house, who thought it was alive. That he had made it live again. That man says that he picked up a prostitute and killed her in a ritual. That is his confession, yet there is no proof that it ever occurred, and the authorities think it was simply another part of his delusion. I thought--”

“You thought that I might be the girl that you were looking for? But how did you know such a girl even existed in the first place? Maybe it was simply something he dreamed up.”

“Because it seemed to fit a pattern he had, of confessing to murders that never happened. He confessed to two others, and both of those individuals

are alive and well.”

“You’re sure about that, then? That they’re well?”

“Quite sure,” he sighed. “They’re both alive, and one of them has no memory of ever even actually meeting Tanzler. But I want to find the third person he confessed to killing, to see if Tanzler ever actually met her; if there was something else, something that I’m overlooking...”

“And why, specifically, would you be interested in all of this?”

“I just am...It’s hard to explain. You see, I’m trying to write a book, and I keep finding myself crashing against a brick wall. Nothing I do seems to crack the surface of this story. And If I fake it, my readers will know, you understand. A writer--a real writer--has certain obligations to fulfill.”

“I see.”

It was amazing. She actually seemed to be shedding years as she spoke to him. When he had first met her that night, he wouldn’t have placed her a year younger than forty. Right now, however, in the eerie gleam of the moonlight as it trickled (as best it could) through the filmy sash of the curtains, she looked as if she could be young enough to be *his* daughter.

“So, you tell me that you’ve met him. Tell me more.”

“Sure I met him. I met him, and he looked just as you described him.”

Pause.

“Did he pay to sleep with you?”

“Not that I remember.”

“What do you mean ‘not that you remember’?”

She began to giggle, and a strange, coy look began to unfold across her face. He suddenly felt anger well up within him, and fought down the urge to slap her.

“What’s so damn funny?”

She continued to laugh. She looked now as if she might be on the verge of getting hysterical.

“You. I think that you’re a very funny man. And I also think you don’t understand nearly as much as you think you do.”

How was he to take that? He felt his blood pressure begin to rise.

“Just what’s that suppose to mean?”

“Nothing personal. Of course I’ve met Dr. Tanzler. Man’s a real genius. Now, give me another kiss, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

She bent over, placing her lips upon his. The lights began to dim behind his eyes.

“What’s happening to me?” he managed to croak, trying slowly to extricate himself from the magnetic softness of her sucking lips. Suddenly, it

was as if all of the motivation and concern were being sapped from his bones by a greedy leech.

“Nothing lover. Just relax. It will all be over in a bit. By the way, I lied to you, about my name. My name is Norma. You can call me Norm.”

It had not been difficult to procure the few things that he needed. A seamstress doll, a cheap Halloween wig, and an old dress stolen off a clothes line during one of his now common, nightly walks. And of course. His special present, the plaster death mask, given to him by he knew not whom, for he knew not what purpose.

But now, it would serve a purpose. His mind, he knew, was like no other mind in the world. It was a unique specimen that could manipulate the very fabric of reality, bending the nature of things into a more pleasing shape, for a little while. He could feel the power pulsate through himself, while walking on moonlit nights alone. It was waxing strong again, and now that he had escaped the clutches of the legal authorities, It was just possible that he could, in some fashion, recoup his previous investment in time and energy.

If he could not have Rose’s bodily remains, he would recreate her from a few fetishistic items, ritualizing in his mind and creating a cone of power sufficient to bend the borders of life and death, and allow her escape once more.

So now, he had assembled the items together, lit candles and incense, sat at his organ, intoning a melody he felt sufficient to heighten the sensation of ecstatic trance he would need to enter to commence with this personal working. Since he had arrived back home, he had reinstalled the blackout curtains that kept unwanted eyes from prying in at the doings of the town’s most infamous citizen. Now, the room was thrown into total pitch when the lights were extinguished. Altogether, given the atmosphere he had created, he realized that this particular working, the first he had attempted in so long, was going to work out splendidly.

Of course, the central image in tableaux, the one supreme fetish with which he would complete his working, was standing at the foot of the bed, covered in a filmy white veil. Once he had meditated upon the power sufficiently, and could feel the electric tingle of floating energy prickle against his skin, he arose from the keyboard, turned, and looked at his giant doll in the warm flickering glow of the candlelight.

“I recreated you before, in the flesh. Now, I can do so, in the realm of the mind. I am all-powerful, when I am in this circle of light, and nothing can

harm me. Nothing can hinder me. Nothing can separate me from...my love."

He stepped forward, feeling the low tremor of the energy like a pulse in his breast, and began to murmur the words of his own personal incantation, over and over again. The light in the room seemed to shrink, to fold in upon itself until they were together in a pool of light, surrounded by shifting shadow.

"Like the ancient mummies of Egypt, I preserved you, and kept you whole in the face of decay. Like the necromancers of old, I brought you back from beyond the veil, to be with me once again. Now, like a master magician, I will imbue this miserable fiction with a wholly new purpose. I command it, and so it is done."

With his heart hammering in his chest, he bent over, and touched his own lips to the cold plaster impression. It was a new romance, suddenly.

It was not long before he began to see the fruit of his working come to order.

He awoke one morning, before sunup, to hear the faint sounds of scurrying in a darkened corner. For a moment, he thought it might be rats, but he could also hear the unmistakable sound of breathing, low at first, but growing steadily more heated as he stared into the darkness, his eyes adjusting to the gloom. He fancied he could see, played out before him like a shadow show, the spirit of a young woman crouching in the corner. Or was he still simply dreaming, caught in the mystery of life and death which seemed to have touched him, in his life, so very intimately?

Once, when he came home, after one of his nocturnal rambles, he entered the house with the unmistakable feeling that someone else had been there. His suspicions were confirmed by several objects seemingly misplaced around the kitchen and in the study, where it seemed, oddly enough, as if his papers had been gone through. Or had he simply forgotten, in one of his drunken stupors, to put them away properly?

He crept up the stairs to his bedroom then, going slowly in the darkness, hearing the high complaint of the boards as they groaned beneath his feet.

"Rose? Rose, are you there, Rose? Speak to me. It's all right. I know how very frightened you must be, after your long ordeal. Come out, and let us be together once more."

His voice echoed, uselessly, in the empty darkness. He went into the bedroom, looked at the lifeless dummy in the corner, wondered if, this time, the magic had truly worked.

She was here, he was sure. She was hiding herself, perhaps not yet fully

formed, but, soon, she would be his to have again.

It was not many days before the dummy began to address him, slowly at first, and with great difficulty, but, finally, with a voice that was more resoundingly familiar, and more sure of itself.

Of course, he began giving her his own voice after cogitating upon the matter for awhile. Like a demented ventriloquist, he would speak to the seamstress doll with the plaster face mask, and then answer for it, doing his best to imitate Rose's voice as he remembered. But, soon, even this was no longer necessary. He would speak, and, like an echo, he would hear the familiar strains of her gentle, lilting tones suddenly lift a few frequencies from the void.

"And how are you today, my dear?"

As well as can be expected , I suppose. It is so lonely where I am at.

"We shall soon see to it that you are back here where you belong."

And how will you go about that, lover? My body has long ago been consigned to the earth, in a secret place, known only to a very few. The worms have claimed my flesh at last, and, now, there is nothing left.

"Ah, but there is one thing, Rose.: your immortal soul. For, if it were not so, we could not even be having the conversation that we are enjoying now."

You're right, Carl, my soul is strong. But it is imprisoned, here, and I don't know where this place is. I can't move, can't see, can't seem to find my way out. Sometimes, very rarely, I can slip back into the house, and I can walk through the hallways, and I can even touch and feel things again. But , always, I am pulled back to this limbo. And even when I am permitted a few moments of freedom, it is like walking through a shadow, or dream, and nothing seems as it should be. I can't grasp the real world for very long, before it fades back into the fabric of illusion.

"Your soul is why I've loved you so long. What else is required? A body is nothing. Every body sickens and dies, and even the best of them grow old and ugly."

Soon, he knew, her voice would begin to fade again; the strange channeled transmission would fall to silence, like a radio signal that had suddenly gone dead, and he would be alone once more, with all of his thoughts. Perhaps he was deceiving himself; certainly, this was the insanity, come to claim him again.

He remembered the ice cold torture of the hydrotherapy bath, and shuddered. Yet, if he was to ever have a chance to make things right, for Rose and himself, he would have to try and suspend the war within himself

long enough to begin again his tireless fight to wrest victory from the jaws of death.

He considered, over a bottle of whiskey, that there might, yet, be a solution to the problem. It was a wild, hair-brained stab in the dark, and it would necessitate a speedy getaway. But he had already begun to make plans to vacate the premises as soon as possible. What was a few more weeks?

A body. A usable body. He could procure one quite easily, with the right connections. If not, he full well knew there were other ways to operate.

He would imbue a dead body with a new soul, a vessel for Rose. Then, and only then, would the both of them find peace. But would the magic, the power, work for him this time?

He drank deeply, clutching at his head and fighting with himself, feeling his sanity driven in two opposite and equal directions. He began to think of his nightly rambles then, his walks through the streets and alleys, often after heavy drinking, but with a mind that could suddenly become clear and sharp (with the madness?)

as a tack, under the right circumstances. The screech of a lonely alley cat, or the passing of a police car, would see his senses grow alert. And when he had moved away from town in his walks, further out upon a country road, and when he looked out at the cold expanse of stars over the tall grasses of an old field, he knew, deep within himself, that the power was bound to work for him. He could feel the spirits calling, once again.

Suddenly, he could hear the voice of Rose rising in his head. It sounded like an agonized wail, a crying out from a place of darkness, and he could see her form, imprisoned by shifting shadow, on all sides.

Her mouth seemed to work soundlessly, her eyes were wild with terror, and when she opened her lips what emerged was a piercing scream that was part tortured imprecation and the roar of a mighty engine, all at once.

His lover was in Hell , again. And he had to rescue her.

Somehow.

That night , he put the doll he had made in bed beside him, holding it close to him, trying to make the rough, unyielding surface, in his mind, into something soft. He spoke in her voice, and felt with her heart, becoming one. Yet, as hard as he listened, he could only faintly hear her actual replies to his words.

“Oh God, my precious, I love you so. Come to me, my precious, and speak, and we will be one together once more.”

He thought he could hear her voice, as a tiny sound, in the stillness of the dark. Wherever her soul was, the connection he had established between them was, somehow, dying. Or, at the very least, growing faint. He felt tears trickle down his face, hitting the plaster mask and sliding down to wet the pillow.

I have to act quickly. There is not much time left.

He fell asleep with it beside him.

He was walking through some dripping back alley. His mind fixated on one white hot goal: to find a woman, a suitable woman, one who could be taken, and wouldn't much be missed. One that was asking to lend herself as an alter to his own forbidden practice. A cat hissed at him from behind some garbage cans. Suddenly, a streak of black dove out from behind the cans, rattling the lids, and flying across his path, stopping once to look at him with the piercing, gleaming eyes of a feline predator. Those eyes, instantly, became for him the eyes of Rose, and he hurried onward, plunging into the night once more.

He had been to a local mortuary, had greased the palms of a local mortician and had been allowed downstairs, into the morgue, and had stood next to a slab. Upon it, reposed the body of a stern, elderly man. The features had grown taut and repulsive with the onset of rigor mortis.

"No, no" he had protested. "This isn't right at all."

A woman with a lewd mouth had suddenly appeared, and running her hand over the chest in an unseemly manner, had hissed at him, "He's a fine specimen. Why can't he be of any use to you? He certainly has been of use to me."

"I specifically requested a woman. I've paid good money for the privilege, and I won't be treated like this by you, or anyone else for that matter. I know the sort of things that go on here, and if you don't watch it, I'll go to the authorities, you wait and see..."

She had smiled, again, shamefully, and suddenly, he realized she was standing before him completely nude. He looked down at the face of the cadaver. He no longer wanted to be here. The nude woman, he saw, was a repulsive, death-like specimen herself; though she bore a young face, her body was that of a debauched old crone. Her flat dugs sagged to her belly, her skin was a leprous parchment upon which was transcribed various bruises, scars, and injuries, and her head was matted with filth and coarse, grayish hair. He felt like he wanted to retch.

Looking down, he saw that the cadaver greatly resembled himself.

The woman began to approach him, her sagging, flabby arms raised imploringly, and suddenly her face took on an aspect as diseased as the rest of her body.

He felt himself ascend the stairs rapidly, making his way by a hidden back exit, out into the night. Behind him, he could hear the strains of an old organ drifting on the breeze.

He was hiding in a row of bushes, outside a bedroom window. He carefully raised his eyes toward the small crack of light he could see, just beyond the drapes. A lovely young woman was combing her hair in a bedroom mirror, enjoying the delicate curvature of her face and shoulders, admiring herself by the warm glow of a table lamp. He could feel his heartbeat begin to rapidly accelerate, as he envisioned stealing into her bedroom, seizing her by the throat, and using a pair of her own nylons to strangle the life from her. Then, he would secretly steal back to his own house, entering through the disused cellar door, and lay her out in his bedroom. He would place the plaster death mask upon her own face, and then, slowly, he would watch the features meld into animation, as Rose came back to him, in the flesh, freed once more from her eternal prison. Then, they could make off together, live under an assumed name, in another country. Perhaps Mexico, or perhaps even further, but, at last, all would be well.

She stood, suddenly, removing her robe, and he could see, yet again, the ravages of waste that played upon her form. Was it everywhere then? Her breasts were shriveled purple lumps, her face was a purple reminder of death's loveless touch, and her hair was suddenly the color of white, rotten straw. She began to slowly move toward the glass, her shadow falling heavy across the light from the table lamp. Suddenly, she was at the glass, her lips sucking dryly against the slick surface, and he recoiled from her, falling through the bushes, out toward the walk.

He moved, images passing before him and fading out of memory.

He was walking down Main Street at night. He spied a small grocery that he frequented, and for some reason (perhaps the sudden light and warmth on what seemed to be so dark a street), he slipped inside.

Behind the counter, he recognized the stout visage of Joe the Pharmacist, standing in front of the three gleaming metal taps wherein the flow of soda could be jerked out for the paying customer. The place was surprisingly dark, surprisingly empty, its cases of candies and shelves of bottles standing like unloved sentinels against the darkness.

"What can I do for you Doc? I don't recall you needing to pick anything

up.”

Tanzler, who was out of breath, suddenly began to feel around in his pockets, unconsciously wiping the sweat from his palms. He was looking for a cigar he thought he had secreted away in his pockets but was not, altogether, sure about. The pharmacist, Joe, looked as if he were a bit perplexed about having a customer, all of a sudden.

Not altogether sure, exactly, why he had chosen to come in here, Tanzler said, “Have you been outside? The streets seem to be curiously dead, even for this time of night.”

“Yep, most folks around here sleep pretty late I think.”

Tanzler considered the man a moment. Something, something perhaps only mildly perceptible, seemed to be off about him. The reaction was too wooden, the face seemed a bit stiff.

“Yes. I take it you, yourself aren’t what they would call, a heavy sleeper?”

The man smiled, leaned over on one rail thin elbow, resting his bulk against the display case. Inside, licorice and peppermint sat beside arsenic and shoe laces.

The grinding on the man’s bones was perceptible; the crack of his rusty vertebrae audible.

Tanzler smiled, coughed. He said, “I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

Suddenly, an overripe smell began to assault his nostrils. He heard a weird dry rasping, and looked down to realize that maggots were writhing in the exposed wrist just beneath the pharmacist’s white coat. Several engorged specimens were shook loosely onto the countertop. He felt himself begin to reel.

He stumbled out of the doorway, certain now that he had been thrust into the mouth of a seemingly subtle hell. Behind him, in the shadows, he could see them slowly amass, like some morbid company of religious exiles all come to meet their prophet. He began to walk down the center of main street, noticing the slither of their feet behind him on the pavement, the low, deep grumbling of their stomachs as their stiff, waxen mouths all seemed to make the same monotonous word.

Father!

He began to run, slowly at first, but then picking up speed in the darkness as the endless, dead throngs began to follow him. What had he wrought? Was this new world to be populated by living corpses? Was it to be a charnel planet of the freshly dead reemerging, nearly seamlessly, into the fabric of existence? He could envision a nation of the reanimated, their

ghastly limbs clacking in silent revelry as they moved against each other in the defacto necropolises of the New Earth.

And how much blood would they need? How many valid lives would have to be snuffed out to satiate their abhorrent tastes? He didn't know. Ahead, the street ran onto an infinite darkness, and his feet felt as if they were treading the air.

And, through the grit of the pavement, that low rumble still reverberated in the sidewalk, in the streets, through the souls of his worn leather shoes.

Father! Father! Father!

He was gradually awakened by a thumping at the door.

He sat up, his heart pounding a tad too rapidly, and, throwing the covers back, began to shuffle out onto the landing, going slowly in the gloom. It sounded as if someone was eager to see him. Probably, he thought sourly, that snoopy bastard Baumgartner again.

He made his way downstairs, not certain of what time it was, and looked out the front window. No, it wasn't Baumgartner. It appeared to be a grocery boy, as the character standing outside, with his hat pulled low over his forehead, was carrying a shopping bag.

"I didn't order anything", he said to himself, half-contemptuously, and went to open the door a crack, to speak out. Just as he did so, the young man out front surprised him.

He put his foot in the door, thrust his arm in, and stepped through by force, nearly knocking the old man off of his balance. Tanzler felt his mouth fall open, and realized he had been taken in by a ruse.

He then felt a sort of growing trepidation as the man turned, slammed the door, thrust his arm in the sack, and wheeled around holding a loaded gun, all in a short, circling burst of motion that left him spinning.

He then realized the identity of the young man that was now standing, holding a loaded gun at his chest. He was somewhat older, a tad taller, and more well-muscled, but there was no mistaking the burning pair of eyes that now penetrated into him like twin lasers. The grim countenance, and the firm-set jaw, were also immediately recognizable.

It was Rose's brother. The hoodlum. The little punk. Although it seemed now that the little punk had grown up a mite.

"How dare you come charging into my home! I demand that you leave at once, this instant."

Tanzler immediately realized how ridiculous the order sounded, and apparently, so did the boy, for he said, "I don't see you as being in any

position to make any demands at all, Carl. Now, tell me: Did you appreciate the little gift I sent to you? I thought you would. You don't know how much money I had to put down to get my hands on the plaster mask."

Tanzler then realized how blind he had been as to the object's origin, and he began to laugh.

"So it was you, hm? Interesting choice for an anonymous gift. Well, I have put it to good use. If you were a smart young man--a notion you'll forgive me for doubting at this present time--you would thank me. I'm embarking upon a new experiment, one designed to bring you and your sister closer together than you have ever been before."

And, with that he leapt forward, his hand reaching out to secure a hold on the pistol.

The youth shook him off easily, throwing him to the ground in the process, and Tanzler suddenly felt a pain explode behind his eyes as the young man reached down to bat his forehead with the butt of his gun.

He seemed to be out for only a moment, but when he finally came to, he was lying on the couch, his shoes off and his smarting head wrapped in a cool towel. It took a moment for his vision to return to normal, but as it did he sat up, looking about wildly for his young assailant. His eyes almost immediately fell upon the mannequin of Rose, covered by the filmy silk veil, as it was now standing in a corner. Rose's brother had evidently gone upstairs and found it while he was unconscious, and then brought it down. Where was he? Still upstairs, or skulking in the hallway or office, waiting to pounce out at the right moment, and be done with him? Tanzler felt fear grip his belly, and, for a moment, he was too scared to do much more than sit there.

"Well, I hope you enjoyed your little nap. Oh, no, I haven't left yet. Not until I get what I came for."

His heart began to beat rapidly, and from behind him he could hear the steps of the young man go slowly across the creaking floorboards. He suddenly appeared before him, wearing a darker countenance than any Tanzler fancied he had ever before seen. The face seemed to burn black and scarlet with alternating spasms of rage and grief.

"You know, you destroyed my parents, my sister. My father is dead, Tanzler, because of you. Grieved himself to death when Rose died. Thank God he wasn't alive to see...what became of her body. What you did to her, possessing her flesh, using it, even after you had destroyed her spirit. My mother? She can do little more than sit and weep now, for a family destroyed, and a life ruined. My youngest sister has left for a convent.

Amazing the amount of damage one madman can do. Oh, you're not about to disagree with me on that point, are you?"

He thrust the gun into Tanzler's face, letting the barrel slide along his cheek. Tanzler said, calmly, "No, no disagreement at all. And I suppose, somehow, you find me responsible for your own troubles as well. Isn't that right?"

The young man considered.

"Yes, indeed that is correct. You see, had the situation been somewhat different, I might have been motivated to use this rather exceptional brain I have for something besides plotting the sweetest revenge. I might have finished school, even gone on to college. But when my family began to crumble, when you drove my sweet sister into a premature grave, and when you further disgraced her with your perversion...well. It seems that even a fine mind can go a little mad, run a little off track under those sorts of circumstances."

Tanzler laughed in spite of things; he realized this was probably unwise, but went on to say, "Nonsense... You were always a two-bit little thug waiting for something to come along so you could pound it flat. You have a glib tongue; well, you came from good genetics. But you were never going to amount to much more than what you already were. What do you do when you're not plotting murder? Wash cars? Bag groceries? I'm all ears, son, really."

The boy let out a wail of indignation, suddenly, and threw his arms into the air, as if he was cursing God and everything under the sun.

"You miserable old bastard, you! You think you know everything that there is to know, don't you? You think that the world is your oyster, and no matter what you do, it will end up kissing your ass in the end. Well I'm here to tell you that's just not the case!"

He walked towards the mannequin, pulled away the filmy covering, and began to shake it violently apart with one hand, his other hand still holding firm to the gun. Outraged beyond the point of fear, Tanzler leapt from the sofa, and started across the room, his arm outstretched, his lips imploring the young man to cease immediately. Couldn't he see he was destroying the last hope of life that that plaster image had of ever again attaining?

Suddenly, the youth stopped, turned, pressed his finger to the trigger, screamed, saw the old man fall backwards onto the floor, and was too stunned, for a few moments, to even move.

He then walked over to the body, stood, gasping for air, and realized that he hadn't had to even fire a shot. Tanzler was lying on the floor, clutching

his breast, his lips moving wordlessly. Only a tiny, gravely whisper of pain seemed to escape from his face; the old man knew he could expect no pity or help from the youth.

The boy sat down on the couch, reached into his coat pocket, and pulled out a cigarette. He had several hours to kill, and could think of no better way to spend them.

Part 6

And travelers, now, within that valley
Through the red-litten windows see
Vast forms that move fantastically
To a discordant melody,
While, like a ghastly, rapid river,
Through the pale door
A hideous throng rush out forever
And laugh--but smile no more. --Edgar Allen Poe

It was a dark, endless night that seemed to stretch on forever.

He rolled over on his side, not feeling the pain, the gentle balm of sleep tugging him under, as the old train rattled and belched beneath him. Here was bliss. At last, here was escape; toward a new destiny, a new name, and a new way of living life.

Before them, the world sped forward into the night, and the night wrapped itself around them. The clatter of the wheels, the comfortable chomp of the engine, served to lull him into a deep reverie of himself. He was still drifting, dreaming and remembering at the same time, wondering what was reality, and what was simply a fantasy.

Outside, as he got up from the bunk to peer at the scenery rushing by, he could see no moon, no stars, only a washed-out plain as far as the eye could see. It was beautiful, stark, striking in its spare vista of awesome black. He retreated a bit from the window. For a moment, it was as if he imagined that, all around the speeding train was a huge gulf of cosmic darkness, waiting to devour him.

The pain was real, though. This body was real. He had lived closer to death than most men, and he knew the icy touch of its cold, loveless fingers deep down inside his bones. He sat back down on the bunk, not liking the steady, rocking clatter of the train as it plummeted through the night, headed into shadow.

How long had been out, he wondered, rubbing his forehead with a quivering hand. His mouth felt dry as cotton, and his lips were sticking together. He wanted, very badly, a cool drink of water.

He got up from his bunk and went to the door, peeping out. He could see, at the end of the passage, the head of the idiot porter bobbing over his chest in slumber. Stupid punk was probably so juiced right now he couldn't see straight. Well, he was thirsty, damn it, and this damned trip seemed to have no end.

It was colder than hell in here, as well. And getting worse by the minute, as far as he was concerned.

"Boy! Wake up, boy; I'd like to have another word with you, if you don't mind."

He saw the head shoot up, the eyes looking wide and surprised for having been awakened so suddenly. The boy breathed heavily, yawned, stood up as if to say, "Why don't you just drop dead you miserable old coot", and walked to the door of his compartment.

"What can I help you with now, Dr. Tanzler?"

"Well, if you could see it in your heart to get an old man a cup of water, while he is ailing, I sure would be obliged, sonny. By the way, how did you know my name?"

The porter turned and disappeared for a moment, returning with a small paper cup. Inside, a very cool drink. Tanzler sniffed, took it, and downed it greedily. He suddenly felt a healing balm wash over him, as his throat had been nearly parched.

"Thank you. Say, you didn't answer me."

The porter smiled. He said, "Answer what?"

"I asked you how you knew my name. You didn't answer me."

The young man looked at him as if he might be going feeble, and then smiled.

"Well, I don't recall ever telling you my name, yet you just addressed me by it. So I was just curious." Tanzler felt a little less vicious now, a little more tired. It was a strange sort of mental vagueness he was sure was the result of the drops he had swallowed for his pain.

Or maybe it was just his age.

"I know...what I need to know. In your case, I know quite a lot."

Tanzler suddenly felt his eyebrows rise. So, he was going to be impertinent now, was he? Well, thought the old man, I probably deserve a little impertinence at this point.

"I know about the little secret things you do when you're alone. When

you're asleep. When you're dreaming, dreaming about *her*. You can't let her go, can you? Never could really love; all you knew how to do was possess something, to fight to keep whatever it was that you reckoned belonged to you. You filthy old bag of bones."

The boy's face had suddenly taken on a snarling, sneering quality, and Tanzler felt his pulse skip a beat. He stepped backward, putting his hand over his heart, and saying, "I'll have your job, you insolent cur. How dare you speak that way to me, a sick old man!"

"That's right. You are sick. And I believe we have the cure."

He stepped forward, thrust out his hand, and took the edge of the old man's shirt in one iron grasp. Tanzler began to struggle against him, and then exclaimed, "You just wait till we get into St. Louis you rotten bum! I'll have your job if it's the last thing I ever do!"

The boy suddenly let go, smiled cruelly, and said, "St Louis, huh? Old man, you don't have to worry about my job. It's a sure bet I'll be here tomorrow, and the next day, and the next week, and all year, and on and on. And, well, I hate to break the news to you, but this train isn't headed for St. Louis."

Tanzler stepped back behind the door, nearly slamming it, and then, with narrowed eyes, said "What do you mean, we aren't headed for St. Louis?"

"You'll find out." said the young man, smugly, his lips curling up into a twisted little grin as he turned to go back to his seat.

"What do you mean? That's absurd. Where in the hell are we headed for, then?"

The boy turned again, hissed, "Exactly. Have a look outside."

He erupted in a choking guffaw as Tanzler turned, slammed the door, and went to the window.

The world had suddenly started to brighten around them, and he could see the vast, endless plain upon which the train roared through an interminable night. Around them, disappearing into the infinite, was a bottomless chasm that knew nothing but cold, shuffling forms of death. And stalking the vast, flat plains in between the spaces were the hideous, grave-ravaged forms of the dead. Millions of them, a vast, swirling sea of cadaverous bodies shuffling aimlessly. Suddenly, they began to press closer, to hold their rotted faces to the window, surrounding the speeding locomotive and beating on it with their withered fingers.

"One of us...One of us!"

He could hear their gravelly groaning through the clatter and whoosh of the train, and he felt icy fear clutch his heart. He began to involuntarily jerk

backwards, supposing that this might be another nightmare. He turned. He could hear that boy laughing behind him. But darkness had descended again, and there was nobody there.

Epilog

It was a miserable little walk-up apartment, in a tenement slum, but the both of them thought of it, for the time being, as home.

Once, long ago, when the street was trodden under the dirty hooves of horse-drawn carriages, and men with frock coats and round hats walked the streets gaily with their ladies at their arms, the ground upon which the tenement sat was the site of a gigantic hotel. It was built by a man named Holmes, who was a murderer and scoundrel, and who constructed the immense edifice expressly to serve him in his criminal endeavors. He could asphyxiate, via a series of gas valves, any of the guests in their respective rooms at a whim. He could then dispose of their bodies down a series of greased chutes, piling them up in the basement, dissecting them at his leisure, selling their body parts for medical specimens, and liquidating their valuables and monetary assets in any manner he saw fit. Eventually, a gas explosion in the basement led to his discovery.

He went to the gallows, believing himself to be transforming, slowly, into an image of the Devil himself.

Of course, that had been decades ago, and the original hotel had been destroyed by an arsonist's blaze. What replaced it was less grim in many ways, but still felt the lingering touch of evil that seems to lurk in any place that has experienced a great killing, or tragedy. It was a place where even the rosiest little children had trouble playing gaily, and might look, from time to time, around them while drawing their hopscotch patterns on the sidewalk, seeming as if they are holding back the frost of an invisible, icy presence.

The hallway of the building was dusty, and grey, and it always smelled of boiled cabbage, strong spices (hallmark of the cooking secrets of so many immigrant families), and the enclosed funk of a structure that has seen better days. Nestled behind the wooden doors, though, there was life in spite of poverty. Sounds could be heard, muffled behind the walls, sounds of loving and life; of the gentle boredom of days; of the groaning of tired feet and hands that resisted the idea of anymore drudgery; of the laughter of mothers and children, inured against the hardships brought on by the molasses drip of time and age.

Of course, it was not only families in the building. The one odd woman who lived there, alone it seemed, was the subject of much speculation amongst the residents of the apartment. Often, they would talk amongst themselves, while hanging the wash on the line in the back (some of them barely knew English) about the odd woman and the strange man she was often seen with.

The man was far younger than her, for one thing. What he could possibly find attractive in the stout, plain older woman was anyone's guess, but it couldn't have been for money. After all, if the woman had any wealth to speak of, what was she doing living in a place like this? It was obvious, too, that she wasn't one of them. She and her beau (were they actually married? No one knew for certain.) kept themselves apart from the other tenants, rarely spoke if passing them on the stairs, and never went out with them to hang wash, or gather at the front steps to gossip.

Often, though, they could hear the melodies of old records drifting down from her room, and they liked that, at least. It lent an air of gentleness to the building, and blocked out the rough sounds of the city; of the cars driving by and children screaming in play, and the boys of the neighborhood playing stickball in the vacant lot next door.

Even if the woman knew what an object of conversation she was in that building, she could scarcely have cared. She had been living in quite a different world lately, one that forbid much meaningful interaction with anyone but her chosen mate. He was a good-looking boy, she knew, if one reckoned looks by the same standards that the average man or woman in the street did. Of course, he was not overly endowed with a fine intellect, but what did that matter? He was forever chasing something, some clue to fill the hollow region of himself where true life and love and understanding waited, hungry. He thought, perhaps, he had found some key to himself, in her. Who was she to dissuade him?

Besides, he was useful. Immensely useful.

Why, it had been just the other day when he had brought to her door a charming prospect. She had been hiding inside, in the dark, her skin being so sensitive to harsh sunlight, and had spent the last few days listening to old records, trying to put some distance between herself and her situation. She would often brood, now, for an interminable period of time, her only friend the radio and her 78 rpm records: warbling oldies featuring the mellow, velvet vocals of Ross Columbo and Rudy Valle. It sent her away for a few moments, beyond the grip of boredom, hunger, or pain.

She had had her music interrupted by a familiar footsteps ringing out on

the stairs. It was Him, the Boy, her patron, and it sounded to her as if he had managed to hook them an interesting prospect for the evening.

As if in answer to her thoughts, she suddenly realized he was being followed up the stairs by another pair of footfalls, this one slower, more cautious, and unmistakably of a lighter tread than that of the boy. Suddenly, his key rattled in the door, and he entered, a young woman following at his heels.

“Good evening , my dear” , he said cheerily, taking off his hat and putting it on the stand next to the radiator. She remained seated in her rocker, closely examining the young woman who was now standing on her carpet, looking mildly confused.

“Oh, perhaps I should have explained. This is my dear, sweet companion, Miss Imelda. She’s always as eager as I am to have company. Aren’t you my dear?”

She rocked back and forth a minute, considering the girl, who seemed, beneath her obvious tipsy exterior, to suddenly seem strangely apprehensive.

She was dark, perhaps Italian, or even a mullato. Almost certainly she was a prostitute. She wondered in what skid row dive he had picked this one up.

“Yes, I am at that. Come over here dearie, so that I can get a better look at you.”

The young woman (who smelled strongly of cheap liquor) looked over at the boy for a minute, with a lopsided grin, as if to say “You never mentioned anything about this”, but did as she was instructed, sashaying a bit as he went. She suddenly felt the stout little woman’s hands creep up the sides of her skirt, slowly.

She’s a hot-blooded one, alright. She will certainly do.

“What do they call you, my peach?”

“They call me...Evangeline.”

“Ah, that’s a pretty name. Timothy must have told you that we’re both possessed of some rather strange tastes, Evangeline. In fact, some very strange tastes, indeed.”

“Oh, I understand. And let me tell you, sister, for the right price, there’s nothing I won’t do to make my new friends happy. We are going to be friends, aren’t we?”

Imelda ran her hand up the side of the woman’s dress, feeling the hot blast of her acrid breath play against her face. The boy went to the record player, which had wound down, and began to crank the handle, finally

placing the needle back on the dusty, scratchy surface.

Evangeline sat in her lap, and from the corner of her eye she could see the boy's face grow big with amusement. She placed a quivering hand to her breast, ran the other one up Evangeline's thigh, and leaned forward to kiss her on the lips.

For Evangeline, the world seemed to swim in darkness, and that single kiss took all the energy out of her body. It was as if she melted into it, and this old bag was no looker, either. She could, suddenly, feel a strange bolt of electricity charge her form, and the music filled the room, and beneath that she could hear the laughter of the young man as the light around them seemed to settle down into darkness.

Evangeline began to struggle. There was something unnatural about this kiss.

Outside, the music swelled to a crescendo, penetrating the tenement walls and flowing out into the stairwell beautifully. A neighbor lady (a tired, haggard woman with four young children who, rarely, got to take anything resembling a break during the day), stepped outside her door to listen. It was really very beautiful, she reflected. She was an odd woman, was the upstairs neighbor, but at least she had a little taste.

Across the fruited fields, echoing across the rusted bails of old wire, the leaning fences, the lowing cattle, and the sagging roofs of so many weather beaten houses, that sound disappeared into an infinity of other, more subtle frequencies. In Imelda's hometown, under the cover of night, in a little house, in an upstairs room overlooking a sprawling backyard that ran down a hill toward a gravel alley, Emily Ford lay in her bed, looking up at the patches of shadow as they swirled across the ceiling. She had been through some strange changes lately, and felt as if, to be honest, she had been living the past several months in a bizarre dream. The night time seemed to call to her; the wind seemed to have its own voice.

She got up for a moment, looking out the window. The world, as far as she was concerned, was now something new and fresh as the day she was born. Reborn, rather; she felt like she was experiencing it all for the first time, every night. She crept out of bed toward the window. Had it really been so long ago when the strange woman had appeared outside, beckoning her to come forward with her, into the fog, into the womb of a strange new world? She didn't think so. She didn't really understand what time was, after all.

She might have been dreaming, or it might have been reality, but in short

order she found herself walking along the garden path, down the sloping hill, to the alley below. Around her, the thick misty fog of the night (it had come in so quickly), seemed to settle around her form. She walked on feet that seemed considerably more light for all the effort.

In a short time it was as if she found herself on an old country road. She knew she really must be dreaming. She fancied she could see lonely figures disappear into the fog, forlorn wanderers that might be the souls of old folks long since passed beyond, or might simply be a trick of her eyes. She wasn't sure. Just beyond, near an ancient wrought iron fence that seemed to be sweating chill droplets in the mists, was a little cemetery, nestled amidst a covering of drooping willows. She walked through the gate, pushing open the rusted hinges easily, the high, thin wail of grinding, decaying metal rising up in an intriguing counterpoint to the steady drip of water and the rustle of tall grass in the soft wind.

She felt, at once, as if she had returned to the bosom of a nurturing mother. Faintly, she could hear voices call her from beyond, as dark forms flitted in the shadows. She was awakening, she knew, from the sleep from which she had been reborn.

She went past broken monuments, their names worn from the weathered stones until they were unreadable, to the back of the cemetery, in the swirling abyss of shadows and gloom.

Below her, she could feel the vibrating energy shivering beneath the icy earth, as the bodies of so many dead shifted in their cold shells, shuffling off the miasma of rot and the cloak of worms each, in their own time, had come to know as their shroud.

Around her, the wind spoke with their voices, their hushed imprecations rising to her ears, sounding like heated whispers; like the high, mocking voice of love, whispering in her ear. She knew she was young; she was, also, eons old at this very moment. She was on the cusp of knowing what no other little girl before her had ever known before.

The fog was thick around her, her sweat was drying on her body, freezing her in the clammy grasp of morning chill. Above her, the sky reared itself grey in all directions, showing its weathered marble visage just above the tree tops, peeking out through drooping branches. The world was cold, and lonely, and belonged to the dead.

Her feet stopped at a mound of dirt, her nostrils taking in the fresh scent of upturned earth. Beneath her was a fresh grave. Someone had been buried here, very recently. There was no headstone, but somehow, she knew that below her was the one she was seeking. The one that had started it all. *The*

Wayshower.

The bodies of the dead rattled in their earthen crypts. She bent down to the mound, resting on her knees, her nightdress becoming soiled in the dirt of the freshly turned grave. The smell was beautiful and overpowering. It was life and death co-mingled; rebirth and rot that had been fermented, together, in the innards of so many writhing worms and nesting maggots. She dipped her fingers into the moist earth, feeling the cold drizzle of morning rain begin to lick her shoulders. The voices from below began to rise.

Skeletons rattling in their coffins. The ground below made a mighty tremor. Suddenly, rising like a strange white bird from the mound before her, a single bony hand began to emerge, slowly making its way up through the layers of soil, until it penetrated the surface.

She reached out toward it, the tips her little fingers shivering in anticipation. The hand was clotted with dirt, its nails were cracked and filthy, but it drew her own fingers as if it had been magnetized below the soil.

She touched her fingers to the groping hand, seeing now more of the soil-encrusted wrist protrude upward. A feeling of electricity penetrated her young body, and she felt her heart flutter with sick delight.

The fingertips were dirty, rough. No matter. She grasped the hand. In a strange moment, there was love.